

It is said that history is written in the moment; however, nothing could be less true. To exemplify this untruth, one need only compare that which can be seen in the history of the world, written by none other than the chroniclers of time, and that which can be read in our books of history. The true timeline shall show a baffling difference, precisely because history is not written in the moment, but retold, embellished and modified, and only *then* put to paper.

That is how the winners of grand clashes always fought against savages, how the actions of a king are always righteous (until after a revolution), and how change is always for the better. However, with each addition to the books of history, we stray further and further from the chronicles of time.

For that reason, this story must be told; the story of a Saviour, one prophesied to come when the world would be in peril, when the many inhabitants of the planet needed their help, more than they had ever needed it before – this is the story of the Saviour who arrived before that time.

Our story starts in the land of Villavar, on the western edge of the continent of Elbe, where a purposed band of travellers were to start their true journey.

Part 1: The Newcomer

Chapter 1

“Honest question, Gilly – do you ever shut up?” asks a cloaked woman, daggers hidden at her waist. The question is aimed at a gruff, older-eyeing man, whose wrinkles are starting to become strongly defined. He carries a large shield on his back, with a short javelin stuck down the middle.

“As a matter of fact, Aldira, I do not shut up. That is because, unlike you, I have a wealth of important things to say,” he responds.

“That’s weird, I could swear I only ever hear ‘blablabla’ coming out your mouth,” saying this, Aldira makes an appropriate gesture in the man’s direction, her hand like a yapping dog.

“Maybe I can give you a lesson or two in appreciating proper words of wisdom, one of these days? It seems like you’re unable to comprehend them, considering the whole ‘being an idiot’ shtick you’ve got going on,” he responds, bitingly.

“Now, now, Gilahad, let’s calm down a bit,” another woman says, putting a hand on one of both the bickering pair’s respective shoulders. Although the woman is taller than Aldira, her frame is much less muscular, contributing to – or being contributed to by – the lack of an apparent weapon.

“Are you siding with her, Evelyn?” the man asks.

“That *is* a good question, Lyn,” Aldira concurs.

“Well, I think both of you could stand to learn a thing or two from Darashan.” She gestures backwards, causing everyone to look up at the taciturn-seeming man towering over them, who simply grunts and nods. He’s large-muscled, however, despite his apparent incredible

upper arm strength, he also lacks a weapon of his own, making him give off the feeling of a brawler.

“Tch,” Aldira emoted, clicking her tongue. “Boring.”

“Come on, don’t be like that. Wouldn’t you usually snap back somehow?”

“It’s too hard, when even our very own Mr. Ruggedly Handsome agrees, y’know?” As she says this, she gives a wink over to Darashan, whose face, unexpectedly, betrays a slight blush.

“Not you too, Darashan! Don’t start blushing!” Gilahad grumbles up at the oddly emotional giant.

“I apologise,” he responds, straightening himself out. “I’m not used to compliments.”

“Wahaha! I’ll compliment you as much as you like, Darashan. Hit me up anytime,” she says, pointing gunned fingers at Darashan, who blushes again.

“Oh, come on!” Gilahad rebukes. Evelyn giggles.

“Hey,” the taller woman starts, as her laughter ends, “we are still *all* on the look-out for an inn, right?” Noticing no one catching her gaze, she repeats, louder and more firmly, “right?”

“Yes,” the shorter woman responds, monotonously, with none of her usual vigour, “of course we are.”

“I am always focused,” Darashan candidly says from the back.

Gilahad hastens to add on, “Yes, it’s the same for me.”

Evelyn looks them all over with a stern gaze – none of them ever directly catching her glare – then lets off the tension with a sigh. “Just pay attention from now on.”

The other three nod vigorously, then plant their eyeballs firmly forward. It isn’t long, however, before Aldira suddenly stops moving, something having caught her eye. The other three quit their movements in a similar fashion, a few short steps ahead, and turn around to face her.

“Find something?” Gilahad pipes up.

“Yes and no,” she responds, pointing in the direction of her gaze. Gilahad takes a few steps back and follows her finger’s direction towards a certain building, to be promptly disappointed.

“It’s...a stable?” Gilahad asks, tentatively.

“Look inside.”

Squinting his eyes, he finally noticed what Aldira had found so noteworthy.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asks, almost in a whisper.

“If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, then yes, definitely,” Aldira responds.

“What? What is it?” Evelyn, whose interest was now piqued, comes back to join them as well.

“If I’m not wrong – and I’m usually not – that would be a griffin,” Aldira answers. Hearing this, Darashan’s ears perk up, after which he, too, comes back to take a look.

“This is my first time seeing a griffin,” Evelyn mentions. “You’ve probably seen one before, right, Darashan?”

“A few times. They used to fly over my hometown.”

“I saw them all the time back in the castle. I remember there were just enough there to warrant a separate stable, which I visited once in a while. My lord even let me accompany him to a griffin show once,” Gilahad reminisces, in an almost boasting manner. “Still, it’s rare to run into one in by coincidence.”

“If there’s a griffin here, I wonder if there’s a human in town,” Evelyn wonders, thinking out loud.

“There’d have to be one, no? No elf could control the thing,” Gilahad responds.

“What if they left it behind?” remarks Aldira, who has taken a seat on a short, nearby wall.

“You’d have to be an idiot to leave a griffin behind,” Gilahad says.

“Humans,” Aldira states matter-of-factly, causing Evelyn to snort lightly.

Catching the mood, Gilahad continues, “You know what they say about humans and idiots,”

“What do they say?” asks a befuddled Evelyn, an equally lost Darashan listening in as well.

Gilahad opens his mouth to speak, but Aldira interjects, “the Venn diagram’s a circle.”

Evelyn now laughs out loud, leaving an even more confused Darashan to quietly sulk on the side. Gilahad looks at Aldira and aims a question.

“I’m surprised you knew about the saying,” he remarks, admiringly.

“I’ve been all over, heard all kinds of things. That’s how you come to know a lot.”

With that said, the band falls into a comfortable silence, fixing their eyes back on the rare beast, to feast on the sight.

Aldira, breaking their hushed moment of unanimous admiration, thinks out loud, “I wonder how much it would sell for.”

The others immediately hit her with a questioning stare.

“And how, exactly, are you planning to sell a griffin? Don’t underestimate how hard they are to deal with. They won’t listen to a word you or I say, and they’re almost impossible to hold down,” Gilahad responds.

“Also,” Evelyn adds, “you’ll have to explain where you got a griffin from. It’s not like you’ll find one in the wild.”

“He’s unhideable,” Darashan adds.

Aldira raises an eyebrow, looking at them like a maths teacher at a student who, halfway through the lesson on polynomials, asks what ‘eks’ means.

“Well, *obviously*, you sell it to someone who doesn’t ask question. And for the rest, you hit him with one of the ol’ tranquilisers, like from this little pouch here,” she pats her satchel, “and

then just drag him on a cart, under a sheet.” While Evelyn’s brow starts to furrow, Darashan and Gilahad, looking unconvinced, continue to argue.

“He’ll never fit on a cart. Besides, your average tranquiliser won’t even phase him.”

“Well, its size is roughly like a horse, right? My theory is that you’d be able to hit him with a horse dart to just about incapacitate him.” Gilahad and Darashan both enter poses of thought, while Evelyn progresses to aggressively frowning at the three apparent fools in front of her.

“How would you strike? They have keen reactions,” asks Darashan, with a growing curiosity towards the rogue’s thought processes.

“Well, I’d most likely jump on the back, hold on to his head and then shoot the sedative right into the neck.” She heavily emotes while saying this, a gesture for each described movement. “That way, it’ll be hard for the beast to dodge, while also assuring a fast effect by piercing him so close to the head.”

The two men once again contemplate her response.

“And then, procuring a large haycart, we can mostly likely tuck him in like this...” Aldira continues, jumping from the wall into a kneeling position, from which she starts to draw in the sand on the side of a nearby garden with her finger.

“You’re joking, right? All of you?” Evelyn now asks, her words dripping with venom.

Like children being found designing a prank, the three look up at their hypothetical mother, about to be scolded.

“Well,” Little Aldira, still in her rebellious phase, tentatively starts, “We would never have to worry about funds again.”

“We’re not selling the griffin!” Evelyn loudly exclaims.

Startled, Little Aldira once again makes a desperate bid to escape being grounded, attempting, “Maybe ol’ Thundy takes bribes?”

“We are *not* selling the griffin!” Evelyn repeats, facing her stubborn child with an unwavering resolution.

“It was just a joke,” Aldira finally gives in, “just a hypothetical joke.”

Hearing this, Evelyn sighs a deep breath of relief, although small hints of defiance and disappointment could still be traced upon the faces of the children. Pointedly, the faux-innocent smile on Aldira’s face hid an expression that may be fit for after a *gotcha*-moment – the subtle stink of successful deception could be smelt from a mile away, yet an undiscerning nose on an unobservant being may fail to be alarmed.

“Wait,” Evelyn pipes up in realisation, “a hypothetical joke?” Annoyance and anger suddenly explode back on her profile. “Isn’t that just-”

“Hush!” Darashan suddenly exclaims, in a loud manner usually unbecoming of him, as his pointy ears perk up, listening intently for any and all sounds. “I hear something.”

As if it were a matter of course, the other members of the merry band quiet themselves without a moment’s hesitation – in such a way that one would not be remiss to call it practiced.

“Follow me,” he states, with both conciseness and direction, like one would expect from a man of few words such as Darashan, shortly before dashing off in the direction of the sounds he heard. The others follow him, with seemingly blind trust.

“Sure is a crowd,” Aldira cracks, looking at the commotion Darashan had led them to.

“Could you two do some more recon?” Gilahad asks Aldira and Darashan. “I can’t make out anything from here.”

“Got it,” Aldira responds, climbing up onto Darashan’s shoulder, after which the giant attempts to move through the crowd, abusing his large stature and muscle strength to push his way to the front, like an icebreaker in glacial waters. While the other two start trying to find their own way through the mass of people, the A.D. Duo – as Aldira likes to call it – finds itself at the front of the established audience, finally able to discern what is so interesting: a young boy on the ground, badly hurt, resting against a wall, and an older woman, who seemed to be his mother, hunched over the boy, crying. In the middle of the road, a carriage is parked – or abandoned, it seems, judging by the lack of a horse to pull it.

Feasting her eyes upon the theatrics before her, Aldira quickly observes the surroundings.

“Looks like a li’l rich boy has ended up in a real precarious situation, D. One million stitches may not be enough,” she remarks, using her bird’s eye view from her personal watchtower to easily overlook the situation.

“How did he get hurt? Can you see?”

Surveying the crime scene once more, the carriage catches her eye. “Loose horse is my best guess. Kicked him into a wall, leaving him halfdead.” She winces, imagining it, before voicing, “Not a good way to go.”

Darashan simply gives a candid nod in agreement, while they wait for the other two to catch up.

Once they do, Aldira dismounts, explaining the situation to the two out-of-the-loop-ies.

As she finishes, the mother of the injured boy turns around, calling out, choked up and in tears, “Are there any healers here? I don’t think my boy has the time left for the medics to come!”

Although her plea is heard – whether out of fear, lack of confidence, or lack of hope – no one responds.

“Whaddya think,” Aldira asks, turning to Evelyn, “Ms. Physis Expert?”

Evelyn sighs. “You know I specialise in anima, not psyche. Besides,” she starts, glimpsing the dire state of the child, “I don’t think we’ll find any skilled enough healer out here to recover injuries like that.”

“No saving-a-rich-kid-bounty for us, then?” Aldira asks, dejectedly.

Evelyn shakes her head. “No saving-a-rich-kid-bounty for us.”

The group heaves a collective sigh at the chancelessness of it all, before turning around to take their leave from the formed commotion.

“Please, anyone!” the mother calls out, despairingly, letting out one last desperate cry before falling to her hands and knees, resigned to the unyielding powers of fate, to the tragedy that unfolded in front of her.

However, in that final moment, a voice called out to her, like an angel descending from the heavens, or a god, slowly being let down on a machinal crane, to announce the existence of a possibility, a chance that a happy end may still be attainable for her and her child.

“Maybe I can help?” the voice spoke out, uncertainly, yet full of hope.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Aldira, who’s turned to give the area one last, short look before exiting – as she imagined all cool heroes do before walking away from the scene, says. “Twist!” she then exclaims, grabbing onto Evelyn’s shoulder as she does so, to fully pull her attention.

“What,” Evelyn responds, “what is it?”

“Look!” she says, pointing towards the voice, approaching the woman, who was still draped over the side of the road. “It’s the human!”

Their interests once again piqued, the party takes back their place at the front of the audience, to witness what would be going down. Simultaneously, the crowd voices their own concerns – they could, understandably so, not imagine that a human would be able to do what a whole congregation of elves could not.

So too, were the thoughts of our company:

“Do you think he can do it?” asked Gilahad, posing the question to the air around him, rather than to anyone in particular.

“No way,” responded Evelyn. “The gift of healing is already rare, especially one strong enough for abuse like that. You really think a master healer would be among the population of a place like this, let alone it being a *human*,” she scoffed at the thought. “Nevertheless, I *would* be interested in seeing him try.”

“Hm,” Aldira grunts in response, “looks like you won’t have to wait long for that.” She gestures towards the human, having now neared the woman, who looks up at him, hopefully.

“Can you save him?” she whimpers.

“I don’t know,” the human responds, unsure. “But,” he adds on, a faint flavour of optimism to be heard in his voice, “I promise to do all I can.” The woman merely gives a curt nod in response, after which the human rushes to the patient’s side.

“Did you get any of that?” Aldira asks Darashan, who brushes her off. Aldira merely shrugs, before turning back to the scene.

“Let’s see what the kid can do.”

Having said that, she looks at Evelyn, who is intently staring at the human, who’s now almost next to the injured boy. As the human reaches him, he kneels down and, much to the crowd’s bewilderment – maybe even dismay – the human wraps the boy up in a tight embrace.

A moment of shocked silence overtakes the crowd, before it boils over and burst out in jeers. *Heresy*, they exclaim. *Against God's will*, they add on. All they could see in their eyes was a freak of nature.

"I must admit, in my many years of life, I've...never seen a healing technique quite like that before," Gilahad admits, shocked by the human's sudden choice of action. "Have you ever heard of it?" he asks Evelyn, the most experienced physis user among them.

"No," she responds, in a state of awe – with maybe a hint of deliberation. "No, I have not."

The mother shoots up with a jerk, egged on by the heckling of the crowd, to step threateningly towards the two-figured, single-silhouetted being that had come to be before her.

"What are you doing with my son!" she yells, as her feet stomp heavily on the floor between her and the human. Although she had trusted the human in her desperation, she had lost that faith the moment he defiled her son's body – if her beloved son was fated to die, it would not be in the arms of man, not desecrated by the touch of a human.

And yet, as she nears them, that weightiness in her legs would quickly be replaced by what seems like a spring in her steps, as the unwieldy burden she had carried in the previous moments of her life disappears from her shoulders – she witnesses the wounds on her son's body closing, his dented body regaining its shape, and his laboured breaths coming to a rest, to be replaced by the deepness of healthy ones.

She fell on her knees, landing right next to the human, who promptly returned the cub to its rightful place – in its mothers arms – and heaved a sigh of relief that combed over the entire crowd, like a tsunami crushing in on an ocean-side city, taking it by storm.

"It's a miracle!" the mother exclaimed, as cheering started to erupt from the audience, at the unexpected happy end of this impromptu theatrical play on the side of the road.

"Unbelievable..." Darashan mumbles in shock.

"Was that a human or a Deus Ex Machina?" Aldira wonders.

"Truly," Gilahad concurs, before all three aforementioned members turn to Evelyn, waiting for her two cents, but she's still simply staring in amazement and wonder at what she had just witnessed, so far away from her expectations that it left her speechless. Nearly speechless, that is, as she would let one short sentence fall from her unexpectedly non-agaped mouth:

"I need to speak with that human."

Chapter 2

“Man, we’ve been waiting here for hours. You think he’s a no-show?” Aldira says, sitting against the wall of the building next to the stable. The band returned to the place where the human’s griffin had been left to rest, thinking he would have to come back there eventually.

“It’s been 30 minutes.” Gilahad responds, deadpan.

Giving him the stink eye, she continues, “Okay but, think about this: what if there’s a second human in town, who this griffin belongs to, and the one from earlier is walking out right now, as if he has no idea that we’re waiting for him – can you picture that?”

“What are the odds?” Gilahad asks.

Still, even though he wouldn’t admit to it, he was also starting to become impatient.

“Lyn said the same earlier, and look where that got us?” Having said that, the band looks over to Evelyn, who’s standing around silently, seemingly brooding.

“She hasn’t spoken a word since we got here,” Aldira whispers. “What do you suppose she’s thinking about?”

“I don’t know, but she must have seen something special in that human,” Gilahad whispers back.

“Well, of course – that technique itself was special enough. Maybe she was inspired?” Aldira suggests.

“Possible.” Darashan affirms.

The three wordlessly stare at their agonising comrade.

“Okay but, what if – get this – she recognised the technique from an underground cult she used to be a part of – which she refuses to admit to so as to hide her dark past.”

The other two just stare at her.

“Don’t give me that look, it could be true! She would’ve fled from the cult after it relocated, which is why she couldn’t have it abolished, but this human is a clue to the new location of the cult and, if we follow him there, we’ll have an epic quest to fight the evil clan.”

The other two continue to stare, without a word.

“And then, having finally taken down the leader, we’ll gain access to the backroom, where they’ve stored *boatloads*,” she lays down extra emphasis while saying that word, “of treasure.” Her eyes light up as she imagines it. “Sweet, sweet treasure.”

“Less possible.” Darashan rejects.

Aldira sighs. “Can’t you let a girl dream, Dardar?”

“We can’t let a member of the team be consumed by delusion,” Gilahad responds.

Aldira simply clicks her tongue with a ‘Tch,’ heaving no further reply, leaving the conversation to fizzle out and die.

A few moments of silence later, Aldira suddenly suggests, “Maybe we should just ask her.” The three share a short, contemplating look into each other’s eyes, after which a unisoned shake of the head reveals itself. From the two shorter members, that is, as the taller’s deep voice booms throughout the air, to the bewilderment of the others, calling out, “Evelyn!”

The addressed faces her teammates, before losing the brooding frown on her profile.

“What is it?” she asks.

Darashan catches her gaze for a brief time, before gesturing to his thief ally, deflecting.

“Aldira has something to ask of you.”

The accused, suddenly thrust in the spotlight, looks at her accuser in confusion.

“Me?” she asks him, pointing at herself, a question which is met with a vigorous nod, causing her to face the object of her curiosity. “Uh, well,” she stammers, looking for the words, “we were just wondering why you were so fixated on that human.”

Taking a few seconds to contemplate, picking the right way to give her clarifications, Evelyn pipes up, “It’s just a hunch, so don’t think too hard about it, but--”

Her explanation is cut short by a loud whistle, causing all four members of the group to turn their heads in its direction, temporarily distracting them. It only lasts a moment, however, after which Evelyn attempts to restart her story.

She is once again interrupted before she can do it, as the ruffling of feathers, coming from the opposite side of the whistling from before, catches their attention – this time, the sound’s coming from inside the stable. The griffin, who has been patiently waiting all this time, starts to move. Standing deftly upon its hind legs, it expertly loosens the leash on its reins, connected to a bolt on the wall, before swiftly freeing itself from the defunct tether intended to hold it back. It spreads its great wings as wide as possible within the constraints of the stable, while stretching its stiff limbs, caused by the long wait, before finally making a running start towards the glorious outside.

Gilahad, in an attempt to restrain the majestic creature, runs forward, towards it. The feathered being before them pays his actions no heed, however, and ascends with a great leap, combined with a powerful flap of its wings, causing Gilahad, who has neared the griffin, to be knocked back by the great force of the wind.

Staring at the silhouette of the creature, quickly disappearing behind the buildings around the group, Aldira remarks, “So it could’ve escaped at any time, huh?”

“A well-behaved beast.” Darashan confirms.

Evelyn, who was still in zoned out in a state of awe and shock, finally returns to the world of the living.

“Aldira, go after it! Don’t let it escape!” she orders, not wanting her newfound ambition to speak to the human to be dashed so easily.

“On it,” Aldira exclaims, before running up to Darashan, who propels her on top of the buildings in the direction the griffin flew off, with one strong, practiced throw. Aldira gracefully lands, holding onto her forward momentum, and chases after the flying creature at high speed.

While Darashan may have been able to pinpoint the source location of the sound, he would most likely not have been able to take the group there in time to stop the departure of the griffin and, more importantly, its master; that is why Aldira, the swiftest and deftest of the bunch, was sent to tail it instead.

Although she isn’t nearly fast enough to keep up, especially considering she has no open path to walk on, she knows chasing after it is far from hopeless – she need only keep it in her sights long enough to spot where it would land. The human, who is undoubtedly the source of the whistle that had called upon the beast to take flight, could not be far removed from the town. As long as she could spot the moment it starts to lower itself to the ground, she has a good chance of making it before the time passes.

While Aldira was still hot on the chase, the three that were left behind were starting to gather their bearings.

“Do you think she can catch up?” Evelyn enquired.

“Yes.” Darashan replies, in a definite tone, without even a moment of doubt.

“On what basis do you think that?” the curious woman asks the giant she calls a comrade.

“I’ve never witnessed her fail on a chase.” Darashan answers.

Evelyn takes in his response, considering it. In the meantime, Gilahad, who’d gotten up and limped over to his two colleagues, still recovering from the shock of being knocked down, weighed in as well.

“I don’t think she would’ve even tried if she didn’t think it possible,” he pipes up. “She would’ve simply declined. That’s what I think, at least.” He looks towards Darashan for confirmation.

“Correct,” the target of the unspoken question affirms.

“Hm,” Evelyn sounds out, accepting the answer. “If you insist, I’ll believe it; you’ve known her the longest, after all.”

Darashan responds with a short nod, while Evelyn bends down and heals Gilahad’s hurt leg.

The three all look in the direction their rogue friend ran off in, a unanimous feeling of admiration for their companion being aired around them.

“I just hope she doesn’t get too zealous,” Darashan says, breaking the silence. “It’d be a shame if she accidentally killed another one.”

With the mouths and eyes of the other two members wide open, after the unexpected remark from their towering friend broke the moment they were having, an urgent sense of dread bubbles up in the two, causing them to also quickly break into a run in the direction of the griffin.

Back on the rooftops, Aldira, who'd just spotted the descent of the creature, does her best to triangulate the spot where the beast would come to land and burns it into her memory.

"I've got you now," she exclaims, confidently, as her eyes focus upon the spot where she's determined the creature's landing to be.

"Just outside town, on the outskirts of the forest, huh?" she continues. "At this rate, I might just be able to make it," she concludes, as the creature's silhouette slowly begins to disappear behind the trees. She pushes her body to the limits, building as much speed as she possibly can.

Assuming the creature wouldn't retake flight right away, it would still be feasible for her to make it before the inevitable ascent. While hoping that the rumours of the human inclination towards indecisiveness would give her additional time, she prepares for a grand leap, having nearly reached the edge of the outermost building in town.

One could swear she were leaving behind afterimages, following the power and speed of her take-off, as she flies through the air, already preparing not just to land, but to continue carrying her momentum onwards.

Even before she leapt, she had scouted where she may be able to do such a thing, skilfully angling her body for that purpose before the jump. As such, her right foot lands upon the thickest branch she could spot in the short time she had, while her left continued forth, finding a foothold and propelling her forward once more. She starts to hear sounds coming from further in the forest – they must be taking flight, she concludes.

"Shit," she cusses, as her time runs short, marked by the sound of rustling leaves coming from the forest, marking the imminent departure of the griffin – as well as the human who would be riding it. As such, Aldira starts climbing upwards as well, hoping to catch them in the air, when, finally, the griffin passes by, right in front of her, during its ascent. Channelling power into her legs, she takes off, while simultaneously pulling out her daggers, which had been sitting idly under her cloak all this time, as she flies through the air, preparing for the landing.

In one swift movement, she lands on top of the creature and encloses the human's neck with her blades. Once she's confirmed her success, she sheathes one of the daggers and uses the freed hand to let out a loud whistle.

In the distance, the rest of her companions hear the sound, coming roughly from the direction they were running in, and instantly understood what it meant.

"That must be a signal from Aldira," Gilahad remarks to the others, who nod in agreement.

"I'll lead," says Darashan, who then speeds up to move to the front of the group, as his better-than-average hearing makes him their best chance at locating the exact spot where the whistling sound came from. Gilahad, a question still burning on his mind, speaks up as they continue to follow Darashan.

"So," he starts, "while we're just running anyway, would you mind explaining yourself? Why, exactly, is it so important that you talk to this human?"

Evelyn, leaving nary a pause between the question and her answer, hastily responds, “It’s still just a hunch, really – it most likely has a snowball’s chance in hell of being true,” she stammers, “but if we missed it, we’d be—”

“Just come out with it!” Gilahad exclaims, his patience reaching the edge – as if it were dangling off the side of a cliff, about to fall.

Evelyn mulls it over for a short moment, swallowing, while letting the words gather in her mouth, before finally spitting out, “I think that human might be the person we’re looking for.”

Meanwhile, back in the air, Aldira still has a dagger pushed into the human’s neck.

“Stop this thing.” she dryly commands.

“I, uh,” the human starts, nearly stumbling over the words, “don’t have any money.”

“What?” Aldira exclaims, surprised. “You don’t?” Confirming it, she scans the body of the human, who merely shakes his head, nervously. Instantly, a seed of confusion takes hold in the elf’s mind, as she had expected the human to have gotten a grand reward for his earlier actions.

“Wait, wait, that’s not important,” she says out loud, mostly as a reminder to herself. “I’m not here to rob you; I just want to talk.”

“With a knife to my throat?” the human sheepishly questions.

“Preferably without, but I don’t have time to take chances,” she responds, still not returning her other dagger to its sheath, but laying her free hand on the shoulder of the griffin’s master, trying to better keep her balance. “If you promise to go back and land where you took off, I could definitely consider removing it.”

“I--I don’t respond to threats,” the human says, taking a stance – although shakily.

After these words are spoken, the flying beast – maybe in response to the human’s words – suddenly shakes with an intense vigour. As a result, Aldira, who is standing on the griffin without any proper foothold, finally loses her unstable balance, causing her to start to fall with a yelp. Desperately, she attempts to grab onto anything she can, letting the dagger in her hand begin its freefall.

Hearing the soft thud of her weapon landing on the ground only a few moments later, and knowing her own body was not quite as resistant to falls from such a height, she strongly hangs onto the waist of the human, which she’d just barely been able to grab a hold of. In response, the human clamps his leg tightly around the griffin’s other side, to avoid being dragged down with his assailant.

“Calm down, Ollie!” he exclaims, deciding his first priority was to prevent any further shaking, then painstakingly moves his head and body closer to the griffin’s, despite the additional weight of another person dragging him down, and comforts the beast with a tight hug. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Don’t worry.”

A tangible serenity could be felt from the scene of the human and his beloved companion, as the love of an owner and pet radiates from the lovely sight – somehow, it is ultimately clear

that there is an incredibly close relationship between the two, that they've been through many a hardship together.

"It's not really okay!" Aldira blurts, breaking that fickle calm as quickly as it had come to be, as she continues to hang on for dear life. She briefly looks downwards, seeing the ground disappeared below her, before a frightened urgency takes its place on her face. "It's *definitely* not okay!"

While still soothingly stroking the neck of the griffin, the human continues to speak to his animal companion. "It's okay, Ollie. I'm not in danger." These words make the beast finally stops its squirming. The human now looks over to the elf, who's put herself in great harm's way to 'talk' to him, and is now dangling above death as a result. In a split second, his decision is made.

"Please take us the ground, Ollie," he says, much to Aldira's surprise – and relief.

"She might die if this goes on."

Having heard this, the griffin's eyes dart around, looking for a suitable place to land, before starting its rapid descent. Scooting safely between the many trees, he arrives at a clearing, floating slightly above the ground for a few moments, so that Aldira's feet are almost on land. Catching the hint, the elf lets go of the human's side, landing safely on the ground.

"Oh, sweet, solid ground! I never thought I'd ever miss you so!" she loudly proclaims, theatrically thankful for life, as the griffin docks on the ground with an *oomph*, a good distance away from whom it still considers to be the enemy.

"Are you okay?" the human asks.

Aldira looks up at the human, still stationed on the griffin, who's decided to prioritise her safety over his own – keeping in mind the fact that, considering her actions, she could easily be misconstrued as a danger to his life.

"Thanks to you," she decides to respond, giving her honest gratitude. Simultaneously, she understands why he ended up being the only one to offer a helping hand to the injured boy, despite being – no offense – a mere human. There may have been people that could've helped, but if they offered to, then failed, it would possibly put themselves in blame's way – even more so if they were – again, no offense – an inferior species in the first place.

Maybe this is the reason Evelyn wanted to talk to him, she thinks.

"Are you implying that a *human*," Gilahad says this word with clear contempt, "might be the saviour? Is your head screwed on right?"

Still following Darashan, running in the direction of the earlier whistle, Gilahad scolds his companion, who's finally explained her thoughts.

"It's precisely *because* he's a human!" she responds, slightly angry at Gilahad's immediate dismissal of the possibility she was entertaining. "There's no way a normal human could unleash physis of that level!"

"Even then," Gilahad continues to argue, "the idea that the saviour is a human, it's...frankly, preposterous."

“I know, it’s a miniscule chance. But if it *was* true, and we later find out that we saw the saviour right before our eyes, had him in our grasp, yet let him slip away because we couldn’t imagine him being it – well, imagine how we’d feel *then*.”

With a heavy sigh, Gilahad gives in. “Fine, let’s give it a shot. I owe you that much, at least.”

Finally letting a smile slip on her face, Evelyn responds, “Thank you, Gilahad.”

While the rest are still approaching, the human has just received Aldira’s words of gratitude, back in the forest. In response to them, he nods and smiles, saying, “That’s good,” before turning to his beast friend, restarting.

“Let’s get going then, Ollie,” he suggests.

In response, the griffin lets out a short, affirmatory cry, before spreading its wide wings.

“Wait, wait!” Aldira yells out, without any semblance of a plan, realising that the human was about to take off again, and knowing that this time, it’d be impossible for her to follow him, considering the distance the griffin has decided to leave between them. “I still need to talk to you.”

The human, remembering the earlier fiasco, grimaces at these words, before responding, “I want to believe you, I really do, it’s just...most people don’t threaten the person they ‘simply want to talk to,’ with a knife, y’know?”

Hearing this, Aldira starts to rack her brain, trying to find a way out of the corner she’d backed herself into with her impulsive actions from before.

“Well,” she starts, “*threaten* is a big word.”

The human’s face contorts to confusion, trying to think of what else you could call that which has transpired. Aldira, similarly lost at the dilemma, lets out an, “I, uh,” starting an unthought-out explanation, as her eyes dart around the clearing, looking for the words as if they might be written on the leaves, and she could find them if she just searched well enough.

“I, uh,” she repeats, before an idea pops up in her mind, as she continues, “prefer the term *aggressive incentivising*.”

With an entirely unconvinced face, the human looks back to his griffin and grabs onto the reins, preparing for take-off.

“Wait, wait, look!” Aldira says, quickly unsheathing her remaining dagger and throwing it to the side.

It flies elegantly, cutting the air around it with a *swish*, and lands in the trunk of a tree, which marks the end of the clearing, and stays stuck in there.

“See? No more threats from me.”

She shows the palms of her hands, holding her arms up above her head to show that she truly means no harm.

“I though it wasn’t a threat, earlier?” the human quips at her, questioning her faux pas.

“No more *aggressive incentivisations* from me,” she corrects. “I only want to talk, nothing more – I promise.”

“Do you swear it?” the human continues, taking things a step further.

“On my honoured great-grandmother’s grave tree.”

The human ponders this response, considering the trustworthiness of his adversary. Eventually, with a sigh, he gives in.

“Alright, fine,” he says. “Let’s talk then.”

Aldira also exhales, letting out all the pent-up stress that had built up during the entirety of the previous sequence of events. The adrenaline finally beginning to fade, she can think clearly again, luckily. Still, this newfound clarity mostly leaves her to ponder how to best face her new challenge – that of talking him into staying. The short silence, as Aldira thinks, allows the human to take the initiative instead.

“So, what do you want to talk about?” he says, breaking the tension that had come to be between the two. Aldira, having just escaped one, is now faced with yet another dilemma – she has yet to hear from Evelyn what needed to be talked about in the first place, leaving her, despite what she said about only wanting to talk, with nothing to talk about.

Without knowing her ally’s motivations, she might end up inadvertently removing any chance of Evelyn reaching her goal, whatever it may be, if she slips up while speaking – on the flip side, one wrong step and the human might try to leave again.

She makes her choice.

“Well, the truth is,” she comes out with, deciding her best course of option was to simply stall to the best of her abilities until her friends arrive, “despite what I said earlier, it’s not *me* who wants to talk, but a friend of mine.”

“A friend?” the human asks, tilting his head in confusion as he jumps off his mount, facing the elf who had forced his return to solid land.

“Yes. She saw you heal that injured boy earlier and suddenly proclaimed that she wanted to speak with you.”

“Then why didn’t your friend come talk to me there?” the human enquires, still questioning his conversational partner’s aims.

“She wanted to talk to you more privately, so we decided to stake out at the stable, where your griffin was being kept. Got us in a real panic when it suddenly flew off, you know” she says, traces of a laugh in her voice. “We never expected it to free itself and go off on its own.”

The human now also laughs at this, then smiles, thinking about his partner. “Yes, it’s quite amazing, isn’t it? Ollie’s great at those kinds of things.”

The human now turns back to the griffin, patting his sides and ruffling his feathers. “You’re a real smart boy, aren’t you, Ollie?”

The massive beast purrs in response, snuggling his head towards the hands of its owner.

Seeing this scene, a smile sprouts on the face of Aldira, opting to simply watch for a brief time, before finally deciding to try to get the conversation back on track.

“My comrades should be running over right now. If you’ll let me signal them again, it shouldn’t be long before they arrive. Is that okay?”

“Again?” the human wonders, trying to think of an earlier signal, before a thought strikes him in a Eureka-like moment, causing him to exclaim, “Ah! The whistle.”

“Yeah, that. You did the same to call your griffin, which gave me the idea,” she responds, remembering it. “One of my friends has really good hearing, so I figured he’d be able to find me if I ended up falling.” Her eyes briefly dart around the area. “So,” she continues, returning to her earlier question, “do you mind if I update them?”

“Go ahead,” he says, after which Aldira once again puts her fingers to her mouth, relaying her new position with a sharp sound.

Simultaneously, the human is once again stricken, like lightning, by another thought, and is quickly overcome with curiosity. Once she finishes her signalling, Aldira looks back to find the human’s gaze boring holes all over her.

“What’s the matter?” she asks, interested in the sudden shift in attitude.

“Well,” the human starts, nearly bounding with curiosity, “didn’t you say you were at the stable when I called on Ollie?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” she states, matter-of-factly.

“Then how did you make it here in time to stop me?” A faint glow could almost be seen coming from the human’s eyes, as the possibility he’d been entertaining for the past few moments might end up turning out to be a truth after all.

“I ran.”

She says this in such a cavalier manner, that she nearly convinces even herself that it was nothing special.

“That’s amazing!” the human proclaims, sparkles coming from his eyes, as the elf before him suddenly becomes an object of admiration. “You kept up with a griffin, on foot, all that way? That’s insane!”

Her no-big-deal façade starting to crumble, Aldira responds, “well, I suppose it’d be quite impressive in the eyes of the average person.”

In truth, she knew it was a greatly remarkable feat, one that’d make almost any person flip out if they happened to hear of it. Realistically, rather than freak out, anyone informed of the act would doubt the validity of the claim, insisting it to be a mere fabrication, or an overdone exaggeration – a half-truth at best. The reason that, knowing all this, Aldira is still staunchly pretending it to be a simple matter of course, is, unfortunately, subject to an entirely selfish clarification – she knows it’d make her look far cooler this way.

And, judging by the human’s expression of pure reverence, as if looking at a divine being that descended to earth – just to show off his powers to lesser mortals – it’s working like a charm.

“No, no, no,” the human insisted, “it’s incredible, no matter who sees it!”

The excessive praise finally beginning to rise to her head, the elf finally admits, “Well, I guess I am a *little* amazing.”

“A little!?” the human exclaims, baffled. “You’re way past amazing! I’ve never heard of such a thing before!” he takes a short break speaking, panting lightly, as his excited shouting starts to tire out his voice. “I wouldn’t have thought it possible, honestly!”

At this point, one could conceivably claim to see Aldira’s nose growing longer due to pride, and no one would be able to completely refute it. So abundant is the admiration of the human, that it causes its object to start letting out a weird laugh.

“Wahaha!” she chortles, letting her arms rest decidedly upon her sides and puffing her chest out with incredible force. “I guess nothing’s impossible enough for this genius!”

“Hm, hm!” the human agrees, vigorously nodding his head. With the conclusion to this line of conversation being reached, a weird stalemate comes to be between the two – the human still looking at Aldira as if she were the heroine of the stories he’d been told in his childhood, who, for some reason, decided to come visit him, and Aldira, herself, still making weird laughing noises. After a bit, Aldira decides enough has been enough.

“Putting that aside,” Aldira says, ending the ridiculousness with a short chuckle. “For now, that is,” she says as a side-note, before closing the distance between herself and the human, while extending her arm in his direction.

“I’m Aldira, your resident – self-proclaimed – expert rogue,” she says, determining it’s about time for a proper introduction.

“Ah, yes,” the human responds, meeting her hand with his own. “I’m Evan,” he says, before gesturing towards the griffin, still sat behind him, “and this is my best friend, companion and partner, Oliver – but you can just call him Ollie. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise, Ev.” Aldira returns, as the two exchange a firm handshake.

Chapter 3

While Aldira and Evan were finishing their introductions, the rest of the gang was still speeding over, Darashan guiding them through the thick forest area.

“So, what’s the plan for when we get there?” Gilahad questions the person who’s brought this whole escapade upon them.

“Well,” Evelyn responds, mulling it over. “First off, hope we don’t find a dead body.”

The two members of the conversation simultaneously stare at the person currently leading them, remembering the worst-case scenario that may have taken place, if Aldira has indeed ended up getting overzealous while chasing the human down.

“If he’s alive and well,” Evelyn continues, “I’d like you to leave the talking to me. I was thinking about a plan while we were waiting at the stable.”

“And if he’s not?” Gilahad asks.

“Hmm,” she wonders out loud, making a difficult face. “Well, I’ll think about that when we get there.”

She speeds up after saying this, leaving a frowning Gilahad stuck behind her, who tries to speak up, but is interrupted by Darashan before he can get even a word out.

“It’s just beyond here,” he states, motioning to the open area starting to loom up, beyond only a few more treelines. “Be prepared for anything.”

Evelyn merely nods affirmatively, as they jump forward into the clearing, quickly surveying the scene in front of them, causing an expression of shock to instantly sneak its way onto their faces. The first thing they notice is Aldira, laid on her back and staring up into the air, using her arms as a pillow.

What’s so shocking about this isn’t the girl herself, but the surface she lay on top of – namely, the human’s griffin, his wings fully spread out and covering the area around him. The next feeling that overtakes the group is a sense of fear, as there’s one less person than they were expecting.

“Hey guys,” Aldira says, with a satisfied face, still sat atop the majestic beast that had left them on a desperate chase, less than an hour earlier. “Took you long enough.”

Evelyn frantically looks around.

“Where’s the human!” she exclaims, an incredible sense of urgency dripping from her words, as an averse response to her friend’s cavalier reaction at their arrival.

“What are you all panicky over, Lyn?” she nonchalantly says, raising an eyebrow at her friend’s apparent hysteria, while motioning to the side with her head. “He’s right over there.”

As she says this, the griffin raises his wings, allowing the group to take in the full-frontal, – and unmajestic – sight of the human, with no real stand-out features to mention – not very tall, maybe a tad larger than Aldira, his medium-short hair only covering parts of his dark skin, shining faintly in the sun, which has now started to set behind them.

“Oh, thank god you’re alive,” Evelyn blurts out, wiping the accumulated sweat off her forehead with her cuff, as she lets out a deep sigh, relieving her of the stress that had been building up during her trip towards this place.

The human tilts his head confusedly at her remark. “Why would I be dead?” he loudly wonders, raising an eyebrow and inching slightly further towards his animal companion, attempting to hide himself, while eyeing the newly arrived group of people with a newly restored sense of distrust.

“Yeah, Lyn,” Aldira sincerely questions as well, simultaneously trying to amend her ally’s hasty misspeak. “Why *would* he be dead?”

Realising her mistake, Evelyn scrambles to make excuses.

“Well, Darashan said...” she stammers, as she turns around to face her friend, who is struggling to stifle his laughter.

Evelyn now frowns at him sternly, realising the mischief that her colleague had been up to, which, aversely, only causes him to break down more, nearly howling.

“What?” Aldira pipes up, her curiosity piqued at this seeming break of character. “What is it? What did he say?”

Taking a deep breath in an attempt to take control of his voice, Darashan manages to calm down his laughter enough to respond. Clearing his throat, he quotes himself from before the panicked rush that brought them here, purposefully deepening his voice even further than normal.

"I just hope she doesn't get too zealous," he states, forcefully contracting his face into its usual stoic and serious expression. "It'd be a shame if she killed another one."

Aldira takes a short second to determine the apparent context of this self-quote, before the penny drops and she, too, burst out in an uncontrollable fit, slapping her knees as she falls backwards, lying down on the griffin once more.

"That's why," she barely manages to squeeze out in-between her giggles, "you're the best, Dardar," Seeing this, the original prankster once again breaks down in a wheeze as well.

Evelyn sighs in response to all of this, not quite capable of seeing the humour in the situation at the moment, as Gilahad approaches her and whispers in her ear.

"Is everything still under control?" he simply asks, with a statement that doubles as an offer to take over if needed.

Taking a deep breath to calm and prepare herself, she responds with a curt nod.

"It's fine, I've got this." She lets out, still in a low volume, as she attempts to ascertain the human's mood in a glance. He, at least, seems to be in a relatively good mood, a light-hearted yet restrained smile clear on his face.

"Speaking of," Darashan suddenly pipes up, after once again gaining control of his laugh-muscles, to respond to Aldira's earlier proclamation of his greatness. He pulls out a familiar knife, something Evelyn saw him swipe from the ground on his way here. Upon noticing what it is, Aldira's eyes light up.

"Lefty!" she exclaims, finally jumping down from the griffin to come towards the one who brought her salvation, in the shape of the dagger she'd dropped. "I thought I'd never see you again!" she continues, teary-eyed, emulating an emotional reunion the best she could.

On her way there, she passes by Evelyn, who has now decided on her course of action and strides confidently towards the human, as Aldira finally re-joins her short-lost friend in the arms of the giant who'd made the reunion possible.

"Sorry about that whole misunderstanding," Evelyn says to the human, wearing a wry smile. "It seems my friend's more of a prankster than I thought."

"It's okay," the human responds. "I enjoy seeing people laugh and enjoy life like that. It makes me happy."

He looks tenderly towards Aldira and Darashan, who have now started a friendly bantering, while Gilahad, attempting to covertly eavesdrop on the more important conversation, pretends to participate.

"Besides, what he said wasn't that far from the truth."

"What do you mean?" Evelyn asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Well,” he starts, responding with a grimace as he recalls the happenings prior to his emergency landing, “I never expected blades of any kind to ever be pointed at me in mid-air.”

Evelyn scoffs.

“Pft, I suppose our Aldira can be a bit rash at times,” she says, shooting a quick glance back towards the girl behind her, now bickering with Gilahad, who hasn’t been capable of hiding his true intentions, before turning back with a proud look.

“But you won’t find anyone more skilled than her around these parts.”

“Hm,” Evan acknowledges, before turning the conversation back to the lady who’s approached him.

“You must be Evelyn, right? Aldira said you wanted to talk to me.” He extends his arm. “I’m Evan. It’s a real pleasure to meet you.”

Although Evelyn’s shocked by the surprising politeness coming from the human before her, having gotten used to the quipping and quibbling of the people she’s been travelling with, she welcomes it happily.

“Yes, that would be me,” she says, flashing an honest smile. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you as well.”

She lets go of his hand, as she recalls the scene from her first time seeing him.

“I was amazed by the courage and skill you showed earlier.”

Evan seems a bit embarrassed at the praise.

“It wasn’t anything that amazing,” he says, humbling himself. “I was only trying to do what I could – it might just as well have failed horribly.”

“No, no, it was quite a spectacle,” she responds, laying on the praise, trying to get him in a favourable mood. “You’re a very capable healer.”

“Thank you,” he lets out, rubbing the back of his head with his hand, as he has a hard time accepting the unexpected lauding of an esteemed elf.

Seeing this as her opportunity to convince him, Evelyn begins her assault.

“That’s what I needed to talk to you about, actually. The thing is,” she gestures at the location of her allies, where Darashan was now forming a wall for a cat-faced Aldira to hide behind from a fuming Gilahad, “Our little party here has actually been lacking a proper healer. After seeing your performance from earlier, I thought that we just had to invite you.”

“Is...that so?” he mumbles out, barely as a response to Evelyn’s words. He seems almost a little disappointed. “I don’t know,” he hesitates.

“We won’t have you work without anything in return, obviously,” she says, picking up his mood and realising she would need some stronger bait to hook him. “It’ll be a mutual deal.”

The human raises an eyebrow. “In what way?” he wonders.

“Well, as a human, I could imagine you may have some difficulties navigating the facets of civilised elf society,” she explains, stopping for a moment to mumble an apology when she

realises that subtly insulting his culture is not a great way to convince a person, before continuing, “I was thinking that we could help with that.”

Oblivious to any insult Evelyn spoke, he confirms, “I suppose I have had some...*complications* while asking people for help with things,” he recalls some of the troubles he’s found in his travels. “It was hard enough finding a place to house Ollie.” He looks to his majestic feathered beast as he reminisces.

“And,” Evelyn continues her sales pitch, “as you may have noticed, we’re far from a weak group as well,” she says, assuming Aldira’s tendency to show off had shown itself again. “We can help protect you if you ever come in contact with any danger.”

After saying this, she glances the human’s expression to glean the status of her persuasion. The target, however, still seems unconvinced.

“I don’t know,” he mutters.

“Look,” Evelyn comes out, deciding more time would clearly be necessary to properly sway him, “you don’t need to choose right away.” She lays a hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t you sleep on it? The sun’s almost down,” she says, referring to the distinct lack of light and warmth reaching the clearing, “it’d be too dangerous to continue on in the dark and cold anyway.”

With a wry smile, Evan responds, “And whose fault is that?”

“True enough,” she gives in, quickly realising the opportunity to sucker the human in, by offering, “so how about we pay for a room in the inn as an apology? A good night’s bed-rest will give you plenty of time to properly consider our proposal as well.”

“A...bed?” he responds, a twinkle in his eye.

“Yes,” she says, immediately seizing the presented opportunity to lure him in further, while thinking that, if it’s a human, it might not be *that* weird if they don’t always sleep in a proper bed, before continuing, “a nice, comfy bed with the loveliest, softest covers.”

“Well,” the human relents, cursing how easy he is to entice, “I suppose one night wouldn’t hurt.”

“That’s good to hear,” Evelyn responds, innerly celebrating her success.

“But,” Evan says, while shooting her a serious, vaguely threatening look, “I do want you to promise me there’ll be no hard feelings if I decide not to join you guys tomorrow.”

“Of course not,” Evelyn swears. “Although I can’t guarantee Aldira won’t ‘accidentally’ land a knife in your throat afterwards,” she jests.

Evan immediately recoils as she says this, however, a frightened expression on his face.

Evelyn, slightly befuddled at his shocked reaction, assures him with a laugh, “it was a joke, Evan.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Evan says, a carefree smile returning to his face. “A very funny joke,” he says, in such a tone that Evelyn is completely incapable of telling whether or not he’s being honest or not. An awkward silence quickly occurs, as Evelyn has no idea how to read his response, while Evan quietly waits for her to say something.

“Okay then,” Evelyn finally speaks up, stiffly breaking the weird stalemate the two had found themselves in, “shall we get going?”

“Yes, let’s,” he replies, oblivious to any of the awkwardness his unusual actions had sought out in the past few moments.

The two turn around to join the now-curious onlookers, who’d recently ceased their squabbling as a result of mutual interest in the conclusion of the more important conversation. As the two reach the others, Evelyn speaks up.

“I’ve offered him to join our party as our physician, and for him to stay with us in the inn until he makes his decision,” she reports, calling the attention of the whole group. “Are there any objections to this?”

“I didn’t risk my life stopping him to object now,” Aldira responds, without a moment of hesitation. Darashan simply grunts in agreement, while Gilahad gives a curt nod.

“Good,” she says, nodding with a commanding smile, as she turns to their potential new companion. “I look forward to hearing good news tomorrow.”

“Hm,” he replies, non-committedly, before making a short bow to the rest of the group. “It’s nice to meet you all, I’m Evan. I hope we can get along, even if it’s just until tomorrow.”

Aldira pipes up right away, excitedly saying, “I’m sure you’ll fit right in, buddy.”

Afterwards, she walks up to him and puts a hand on his shoulder. “How about, as proof of our new allyship, I let you hitch a ride?” With her thumb, she points at Darashan over her shoulder.

Evan confusedly tilts his head.

While the question marks float answerlessly over Evan’s head, Gilahad approaches Evelyn and strikes a hushed conversation, to ensure the human doesn’t hear anything they don’t want him to.

“Is this alright?” he asks, curious to the intention behind Evelyn’s approach. “You didn’t say anything about the saviour situation.”

“I’d rather not risk being tried for heresy,” she bluntly retorts. This irks Gilahad, who’s expressly worried for anything that might compromise the safety of the group.

“You’re walking a damn fine line for someone saying that,” he bites at her.

Evelyn takes a deep breath, trying to find the best way to put her thought process.

“As long as we can affirm or deny the notion without ever speaking of it publicly, we should be able to defend ourselves if it comes that far.”

Hearing her say this, Gilahad realises that she’s considered this more than he himself has – in truth, he hadn’t even thought of the possibility of a heresy trial until she brought it up – and quickly relents. In any case, he should trust his allies if he wants their goal to come to fruition, he thinks.

“I apologise. It seems I’m still not thinking of you properly, as an equal.” As he says this, he sincerely bows in an offering of remorse.

“It’s okay, Uncle,” she smiles at him, forgivingly. “Didn’t you always use to say that you have to prove yourself an equal first?” she reminisces back to her younger days, when her respected uncle would give her nuggets of wisdom to let stir as she grows up.

“I’m still in the middle of earning that respect.”

With that said, the two share a soft, tender look of mutual remembrance, as they think back to simpler times, any and all traces of friction being lost in the process. Finally, Evelyn continues.

“I just hope he doesn’t refuse,” Evelyn says, a worried expression plastering her face now.

“Pft,” Gilahad scoffs in response, laughing at the notion. “Can you really look at that and think it possible?”

He gestures to the location of the other three members of the group, where Aldira is ushering her potential new friend towards Darashan, while pointing up to his shoulders. Evan seems to have brought up some sort of concern over the possibility of her proposed course of action, causing Darashan to start taking poses and flexing to show off his muscles. Once he’s done, Evan reluctantly agrees, after which Aldira helps him climb onto the tall man’s shoulders, following suit once she’s done, taking a seat on the unoccupied shoulder.

“I suppose not,” Evelyn responds, while letting out a subdued laugh at her companions’ shenanigans. As she finishes, a loud voice can be heard, exclaiming, “Onward, steed!” followed by a roar from the ridden, as well as a yelp from one of the riders, clasp tightly to the head next to where he’s seated. Shortly after, Ollie, who has been quietly lying on the floor ever since Evelyn started her negotiation with the human that had caught her intrigue, also arose to follow them.

A final, “Woohoo!” coming from the direction the trio ran off in, marks the departure from the forest, as the two left behind also follow them away from the clearing.

Chapter 4

“Then, although it’s a bit late, let me formally introduce everyone,” says Gilahad, the only one stood up in the middle of the group, seated all around him

The morning after Evan was offered to become a member of the party has arrived, but there has yet to be an answer from the human. The main reason for this is that, after returning to town and locating an inn, Evan quickly excused himself and retreated to his room. Once the sun had risen, Aldira was sent to wake him up, as he had yet to show himself more than an hour after every other member of the group had joined the world of the living.

Entering his room, she found him ‘aggressively snuggling up to his covers’ – her words – and was forced to physically drag him out of bed, much to the sleepyhead’s dismay. After sobering up from his trance-like state, he profusely apologised to everyone, laying the remorse on extra thick towards Aldira, while admitting that he’d gotten used to resting on stacks of hay or patches of grass, together with his animal friend. The others, unsure whether they should

take this to be a human thing or simply an eccentricity of the person himself, accept his apology – although slightly confused as to why he’s so apologetic in the first place.

Afterwards, once Evan had whistled his friend over, they made their way out of town and back into the clearing where they had first met him, not even having touched the topic of the proposal, landing us back in the present.

“First off, there’s me,” Gilahad points to himself as he continues the introduction, “Gilahad Gremor. I’m of the sun prima, specialised in anima, and I’m also the leader of the group.”

“Self-proclaimed!” Aldira interjects, before being glared at for interrupting his moment.

“The rude one over there is Aldira Thunderbrand, our moon-powered-child of a rogue.”

Aldira does a short wave with the spiteful introduction, whereafter Gilahad decides he has to give credit where it’s due, at least. To this effect, he adds, “She’s a skilled illusionist.”

In response, the described simply gives a subdued salute.

“Moving on,” Gilahad continues, “the giant next to her is the sky-born Darashan.” The addressed gives a curt nod of acknowledgement. “He doesn’t talk much, but you can always trust him to be there when you need him.”

Aldira looks slightly perturbed at the difference in tone between their introductions, but, since it’s Darashan, she lets it go without a word of protest.

“And finally, there’s Evelyn Gremor, my niece, and the one who convinced us to try and recruit you.” Gilahad gestures towards the last unIntroduced person. “She did our healing before, but she’s actually specialised in anima, which is why we’re hoping you could take her place as our physician.”

Having finished his introduction, Gilahad turns back towards Evan, saying, “And that’s everyone.”

Surprisingly, what he finds as he looks at Evan is a perplexed child, staring confusedly into the air.

“Was something unclear?” Gilahad asks, raising his eyebrow as he hasn’t said anything unusual – to his knowledge, at least.

“No, I was just wondering...” Evan says. “How was Darashan born in the sky?”

At this response, Aldira immediately bursts out into uncontrollable laughter, with Darashan barely managing to hold it back – even Evelyn seems to be on the verge. Meanwhile, Gilahad looks at the inquisitor with a blank expression, before answering.

“It simply means he’s of the sky prima,” he responds, wondering why he even has to answer such a question.

“Ah, about that as well,” Evan continues his questioning, reminded of something else he was wondering about, “what are these ‘primas’ you keep mentioning?”

Gilahad, too, starts laughing now. Not because he thinks something is funny, no not at all: his laugh is a sad, hopeful one, one of wistfulness – if he doesn’t accept it as a joke, he’ll have to recognise it as a serious question, therefore he must be kidding, therefore I must laugh.

Such was his thought process.

However, Evan did not laugh along, nor did he, in any way, indicate that it was indeed a joke. He simply sat there, the same confused expression still showing. As soon as he spies that, Gilahad returns to his senses.

“You—” he lets out, in disbelief, “you’re serious, aren’t you?”

Evan nods, and Gilahad starts staring blankly into open space, physically resisting the instinctual movement of his palm towards his forehead.

“Evelyn,” he says, turning around, “can I talk to you for a second?”

Before the questioned can answer, she’s already whisked out of earshot by Gilahad.

Taking the initiative, Evelyn says, “It’s not that bad,” to him, getting it out of the way before he can burst out into a million break-less words, a frenzied storm that’d be impossible to sneak any words in-between, no matter how hard she would try.

“Not that bad, you say?” Gilahad exclaims this, while looking at her like she was talking about the pig she saw fly yesterday. “*Not that bad?*”

“Yes.” She simply answers.

Gilahad slams his hand against a nearby log, wincing in pain a second later, but being too angered to care.

“He doesn’t even know what a damn prima is!” he yells out. “Shit, he’s so clueless, he probably doesn’t even know everyone was laughing at him!”

“Shush!” Evelyn says out loud, putting her finger over his mouth to shut him up. “You’re getting overexcited.”

Gilahad takes a deep breath, realising people in town would probably be able to hear him, let alone the accused, who’s right there with them.

“Sorry, that was too much,” he apologises after calming down. “Nonetheless, I’m sticking by what I said – there’s no chance that thing’s the saviour,” he finishes, still visibly angered.

“The odds are slim, but that doesn’t make it impossible,” Evelyn replies.

“But—” Gilahad begins to argue, before being cut off by Evelyn, shushing him once more.

“We discussed the possibility of the saviour being sheltered, didn’t we?” she reminds him, recalling a conversation they had shortly after the start of their journey.

“We did,” he agrees, before introducing a reasonable element of doubt, “but to this degree?”

Evelyn is unable to offer a rebuttal so quickly, prompting Gilahad to continue his own line of reasoning.

“If you were raising the saviour, who has control over every single prima, would you really not teach him what a prima *is*, at the very least?”

“The difference is that he was raised a human,” Evelyn finally counters. “It’s perfectly reasonable that his parents wouldn’t realise he’s the saviour, since they wouldn’t know much about primas and runes.”

Gilahad, despite following the train of thought, is still unable to accept the conclusion.

“Even if it *could* be possible, that doesn’t mean it *is*,” he offers back, weakly, knowing full well what the response will be and that he’ll have no real way to refute it.

“I know it’s a longshot,” she responds, “but there’s no reason not to try.” She now recalls something Gilahad said in the past, when he invited her to join him for his quest to find the saviour. “‘No matter how low the odds,’ right?”

“Fine,” Gilahad sighs, cursing his words for always biting him in the ass. “Let’s go back, then.”

Evelyn nods, and the duo return to the rest of the group.

On their way there, they find Aldira shooting them a difficult look, an expression that almost seems to be warning them of something, whereafter she looks over to Evan.

He’s sitting there, completely silently, in a contemplative pose, his chin resting on his hands.

“Where were we?” Gilahad says, deciding to simply plough through any difficulties that may arise, based off of Aldira’s cautionary sign.

His statement doesn’t seem to land for Evan, who completely ignores what Gilahad says to bring forth his own topic.

“I’m sorry for being clueless.” He apologises, in such a way that, although it is clearly a statement that would usually be said passive aggressively, everyone immediately realises it is meant as an honest apology.

Finally acknowledging the fact that his outburst must, indeed, have been overheard – an awareness that also explains Aldira’s expression as they returned – Gilahad decides an apology is in order.

“Look, about what I said...” he starts, but Evan holds his hand open-palmed before him, like a stop sign.

“No, don’t apologise,” he interjects, “you were right, after all. It’s true that I don’t know anything about the world, and that I’m too oblivious to things around me.”

As Evan is putting himself down with his own words, you’d expect to hear melancholy, sorrow or gloom in his voice, but the reality was different. As he says this, he looks wistful at worst, and determined at best. It’s clear to understand that Evan was shocked by what he overheard, but that he thought hard about it, in those few moments before he was approached, and has come to his own conclusion:

“It’s precisely because of that cluelessness of mine that I *have* to ask questions, even if I risk looking like just another stupid human to you all – if I don’t, I can never stop not knowing anything.”

After he finishes his passionate mini-speech, Aldira is the first to move, walking up next to him and putting an arm around his shoulder.

“You don’t just *risk* looking stupid,” she bluntly blurts out, much to everyone else’s dismay.

“But,” she continues, her proclamation apparently having a second half, “if we hated people who look stupid, we would’ve kicked Gilly out a long time ago.”

An insulted Gilahad wants to quip back after this remark, but, feeling the atmosphere, he realises that’s not an option right now. Aldira carries on speaking.

“So look stupid all you want, we won’t mind. Rather, make sure you ask away – we’ll all be glad to answer any questions you may have.”

As she says this, she looks him straight in the eye, a wide smile slathered across her face. “Okay?”

“Yes! Thank you very much!” Evan exclaims, beaming so brightly that Aldira – who likes to fame herself on unbreakable nerves – instinctively backs out of the eye contact in embarrassment, something she considers a personal defeat. She silently resolves to return the favour another time, as she returns to her seat, next to Darashan, who was, as per usual, sitting around quietly, holding his tongue unless required.

“In that case,” Evan continues, turning back to Gilahad, the source of all troubles, “please teach me about primas!”

Saying this, he shines, inadvertently almost blinding the man as he asks, like a child curiously enquiring his father, who’s like an inexhaustible well of knowledge, about everything he sees around him.

“I suppose I can’t refuse,” Gilahad responds, trying to sound low-key, despite secretly being a little happy at the opportunity to share his wisdom with an interested child.

“Thank you very much!” Evan once again exclaims, with a respectful bow towards his knowledge-benefactor.

Taking a deep breath to calm down, so his now-good mood doesn’t seep onto his face any more than it already has, he resets back to his standard, slightly stern expression. He grabs a long stick, so he can write in the dirt, while also preparing a proper explanation.

“Primas are the determinant sources of magical power,” he starts his breakdown of the subject, while writing the word in the dirt.

“Magic?” Evan lets leak, in wonder. Gilahad nods, before continuing.

“There are four primas in total: the sun, the moon, the sky, and nature.” Every time he mentions the name of one of them, he draws an appropriate symbol in the ground. “These symbols are the runes through which one channels the magical power of the four sources.”

“Do all of them let you use a different type of magic?” Evan queries, as he looks curiously over each of the symbols, burning them into his memory.

“Yes,” Gilahad concurs, “more or less. Specifically, every prima allows the use of a magic from two distinct categories.”

As he says this, he writes two words on the ground: on the left of the symbols, he writes *Anima*. On the other side, he writes *Psyche*.

“Roughly speaking, anima is creation, allowing one to bring something new into the world. Psyche is manipulation, allowing one to interact with the world in a new way.”

Gilahad looks to Evan, to see if he’s still paying attention, to find his eyes shining with marvel.

“For example,” he happily chatters on, “the power you used to heal that injured child yesterday was *physis*, which is the psyche magic – the right side – of the nature *prima*. On the other side, there is the power over elements – which, I remind you,” he steers the stick towards Evelyn, “is her specialty.”

Evan’s look of childlike wonder is now redirected towards Evelyn, who is overwhelmed for a short moment by its blinding brilliance, before she takes back control.

“Care for a demonstration?” she offers, causing Evan to vehemently move his head up and down.

After dramatically presenting her hand, like a magician preparing a trick, Evelyn opens it, and a flame suddenly bursts into being, dancing violently - yet somehow controlledly - upon her palm. After letting it spark for a few seconds, she shuts her hand and moves it, quickly and decisively, to the side, as if she were catching a firefly in mid-air, adding a final flair to her trick.

A *Wow* escapes from the mouth of Evan, who’s never witnessed anything like this before.

After staring blankly into the air for a few moments, still comprehending the revelations, Evan turns back to Gilahad, once again looking to enquire him.

“Then,” he asks, “what’s your specialty?”

In a dramatic manner, Gilahad responds, “I specialise in anima as well, but with the sun *prima*.”

“Specifically,” he continues, pausing to pull out a coin and putting it on the back of his left hand, where what Evan recognises as the symbol of the sun is visible. “I can create *force*.”

As he finishes his sentence, without his hand moving an inch, the shining currency is launched high into the air, rapidly spinning as it flies up, before landing perfectly back into the palm of Gilahad’s outstretched hand.

Afterwards, Gilahad immediately looks to Evan, in a pretend cavalier manner, much like a teen trying to impress their group of friends by acting cool after doing something great. He does this with great success, as Evan is still enamoured.

However, the next thing Evan says would break the amicable mood like a twig underfoot.

“I wonder what I’ll be best at?” he thinks out loud.

The moment these words are spoken, a feeling of tension washes over the group, due to the uninformed child’s misinterpretation, based off the little information he’s gotten. It is, of course, impossible for any normal person to learn the use of multiple *primas* – anyone with common sense knows that.

This person, however, does not fall into that category – which, in all fairness, is both good and bad for the rest of the group. The good part is that, with the situation as it is, they could

find out whether Evan is the saviour they are looking for, without ever having to speak of the idea openly, removing any and all risks of perpetuating it. Every member of the group realises this.

Except, of course, the one elf who's been left completely out of the loop, having dashed off far before the subject of Evan as the saviour had ever come to mention – which is the bad part.

The eyes of all members of the group turn towards their ticking timebomb of an ally, who had yet to be informed of the matter, as she opens her mouth to correct him, with a smile that mirrors her sentiment, like an older sister about to break her younger sibling's heart-warming delusion – such is the impression she gives off.

Darashan moves automatically, putting his hand on her shoulder and giving a light tug to stop her, without a moment's thought about a follow-up.

"Hm?" she turns, facing her interrupter with a raised eyebrow. Having obviously not come up with a plan, he quickly deflects the implied question by redirecting his look towards Evelyn, causing Aldira to follow, doing the same.

"Well," Evelyn scrambles, suddenly put on the spot, "I was just thinking that... we... don't all need to be here for this explanation, so we, uh, might as well go do some training? In the meantime?"

Aldira, entirely unconvinced by this improvised cover, but always quick to feel the mood, grasps that there's something more going on, and sceptically agrees.

"...sure," she says.

Visible relief could be momentarily seen upon the group's faces, having defused the explosive, before they realise how suspicious it must look to Evan. He, however, seems completely oblivious as he patiently waits for them to finish up.

"Then, the three of us will be going this way for a bit," Evelyn says, guiding the other two away from the clearing.

With all distractions – and, most importantly, the volatile rogue – removed from the equation, Gilahad returns back to the subject that caused such a disturbance.

"Well, I don't know about your specialty," he answers the question that has been floating around for the long few moments that passed. "But, how about I teach you a little sun magic to get started?"

"You will? Really?" Evan excitedly exclaims.

Finding himself once again caught up in the enthusiasm radiating from his potential new student, he replies with a nod, and the two begin without a second's wait.

Part 1 Finale

Once Gilahad finishes explaining the basics of sun magic, – unsuccessfully, as was the gruff man's expectation – when the sun is highest, the group exits the forest in the opposite

direction of Villavar, travelling eastward. Shortly after they left the cover of the trees, however, they were, predictably, showered by a downpour. Although Darashan quickly pulls up a bunch of umbrellas, seemingly out of nowhere, for everyone to hide under, all of them had still gotten soaked, to various degrees. It doesn't help that the sun stubbornly refuses to show its face from behind the endless stream of clouds that cover the sky. After a while of walking like this, everyone is suffering to various degrees, the cold of the west combining with the water to chill them to the bone, but one person in particular is forced to endure extra hard.

This person is Aldira, who, being the rogue, has always dressed lighter than the rest of the group. She always says that more than one layer completely impedes movement, and firmly refuses to bundle up more, no matter how much Gilahad insists.

After aggressively shivering for the nth, due to another gust of wind, she finally gets fed up with it.

"Dardaaar," she whines, "you were born in the sky, right? Can't you do something about this?"

"Although I may have been born on a cloud, I can't adjust the weather. It goes against sky-born regulations." Darashan responds, joking along. These two had been making jokes about Darashan being born in the sky almost the entire time since Evan had first remarked about the term, during Gilahad's introduction. It had gotten to the point that even Evelyn, who usually stops their fooling around, couldn't help but laugh a little at the lengths they're going to.

"If only there were something you could do to not be so cold," Gilahad quips, mocking her.

"If only," she responds, completely ignoring the implied meaning behind his statement.

Taking both of their remarks at face value, Evan suddenly has an idea.

"You could stand in Ollie's wing if you want," he suggests, gesturing towards the griffin, who is walking obediently next to him.

"...are you sure?" she responds, with reluctance spelled out across her figure. "I wouldn't be eaten or something?"

"Why would you?"

"Well, unlike you humans, I don't get along very well with fierce beasts – I can't get a read on the things," Aldira says, explaining her reasoning. As a result, she gets glared at by Evan and causes the griffin, who turned his head to listen along, to face away from her in indignation.

"If you act like that, of course you won't get along," he remarks in response. "It's not very nice to call someone a beast, or imply they'll attack you without reason."

"What? But it's true, isn't it?"

"Well," Evelyn pipes up, "that doesn't mean you should say it."

"That's right," Gilahad says, joining in on the chewing-Aldira-out-club. "If I called you a featherless biped, there's no way you'd take it sitting down."

"Yes." Darashan finally remarks as well. "You should apologise to Oliver."

“What? I—” she starts to complain, before realising from everyone’s glares – some far more jokingly than others – that she has no allies in this discussion, so she gives in and plays along.

“Okay, alright, I’ll do it,” she says, before facing the griffin, who’s still looking away.

“I’m sorry for calling you a fierce beast, Ollie. From now on, I’ll respectfully address you as a majestic creature,” she apologises. In response, the griffin once again faces Aldira, who then whispers to Evan, “Was that okay?”

He nods, his trademark soft smile back on his face, and instructs, “Now, calmly approach him, while showing both your palms.”

Her footfalls as light as possible, she does exactly that. She’s allowed close without any complaint from the griffin, who lowers his head and closes his eyes. From behind, the next step is conveyed to her at the same time.

“Now, slowly lay your hand on top of his head, and gently stroke along his fur.” Dutifully, she follows the instruction and, as the creature softly lets out a deep purr, she excitedly turns around to look at Evan, who looks delighted at the heart-warming scene unfolding between his long-time companion and new friend.

After a few moments of this, however, Aldira has to ask for consult on her next course of action.

“Okay, what now,” she loudly whispers.

“You wanted to warm up, right?” he reminds her

“Oh, yes, yes,” she mutters, as she turns back to the animal. “Would you allow me to take cover in your wing?” she asks him.

In response, he extends his wing, creating a wide space under it, which Aldira quickly snuggles into.

“Oh jeez,” she says, as she’s enveloped by the warm feathers, “that’s heavenly.”

“Isn’t it?” Evan remarks, clearly glad that someone else now understands as well.

“If I knew it were this easy, I would’ve become a tamer instead of a rogue! Those people rake in the dough in groves, I’m sure!” she proclaims.

“Well, it’s only so simple because Ollie’s a very good boy. Right Ollie?” Evan says, providing a more nuanced perspective, and the griffin purrs in response.

“A well-behaved beast,” Darashan once again confirms.

“Why don’t we test it? It’s not particularly far to the southern reservoir from here, we’ll be able to find a griffin or two down there,” Aldira suggests.

“No.” Gilahad immediately responds, shooting the proposition down at the root.

“Oh come on,” she complains, “at least give it some thought? It’s a beautiful area.”

“It *is* very beautiful,” Darashan confirms.

In response, Gilahad whips his head around to scowl at the two, his brow aggressively furrowed.

“Look, if you two think we have the time to—” he half-yells, starting what would most likely end up in another endless rant, if it weren’t for Evelyn interrupting him at the beginning.

“Hold that thought,” she says, grabbing everyone’s attention. “Do you see that?” she gestures forward, slightly to the left, where another road joins the one the group has been walking on.

“It looks like some fancy schmancy cart slipped off the road and got stuck in a ditch,” Aldira says, squinting her eyes to see as much as possible.

“Can you hear what they’re saying?” Gilahad asks Darashan, who’s already pricking up his ears, much like an alert dog, sniffing out its prey through sound. After listening in for a few moments, everyone dead silent so as not to disturb his focus, he starts to explain what he’s heard.

“Someone’s cart slipped off the road, due to the rain, and got stuck in a ditch.”

“Told you so,” Aldira brags, matter-of-factly.

“And,” Darashan continues, “now they’re being extorted by the rest.”

“Extorted?” Evan exclaims, almost frantically. “We have to go help them!”

Immediately, Gilahad realises the sticky situation they’ve now gotten themselves into. Considering what he knows of Evan’s personality, he’ll most likely continue to insist on going to assist, which brings great peril with it. If the enemy really is malicious, there’s a good chance it’ll end up turning into a fight, which is something he’d greatly like to avoid, at the very least until Evan has learned the basics of what can be done with all the different primas.

“Now see here,” he says, taking the lead in the conversation. “Those guys are with, what?” he stops speaking to look intently towards the far-away scene, “Seven people? Something like that?”

“Eight, I think. Probably one or two hiding in the shrubbery as well,” Aldira interjects.

Gilahad nods to affirm this assessment. “We, in contrast, are with only four capable fighters. Plus, if a fight *does* break out, we’ll have to protect you as well. It’s too risky.”

“I...I might not be able to fight, but I can keep all of you in good condition with my healing,” Evan argues. “That’s why you recruited me, right?”

This statement hits a nerve amongst the group, as they’d almost forgotten the excuse they’d used to get Evan to stay in the party until they find out whether or not he’s truly the person they’ve been looking for.

“Even then, he’s right,” Evelyn concurs. “It’s far too dangerous.”

“Hold that thought,” Darashan suddenly pipes up again, relaying his newly gained intel, heard during the silence resulting from Evan’s unintentionally hard-hitting question. “It seems the extortioners are minions of Thunder.”

Oh, come on!” Gilahad exclaims in frustration at this observation, before rubbing his forehead and sighing.

“What?” Evan asks, looking confusedly around him. “Who’s Thunder?”

"I'm glad you asked," Aldira says, a big ol' smile plastering her face as a result of her amusement at this turn of events. "He's 'someone we *absolutely cannot* afford to ignore,' right Gilly?"

At being reminded of another one of the things he'd said to Evelyn, when he recruited her to the cause, Gilahad once again curses his own words for always coming back to bite him in the ass.

With as deep a sigh as he can heave, he gives in.

"Alright, fine, let's go help."

Once these words are spoken, Evan's face immediately lights up, as he says, "Really? Yes!"

"However!" Gilahad speaks up, laying down his conditions. "First, we'll try to persuade them. I'll do the talking."

"Yes, of course! Peaceful methods are the best," Evan agrees, nodding.

"Boring," Aldira disagrees.

"Don't you *dare* turn this into fight, Aldira," he says, sternly glaring at her.

"I won't, I won't," she affirms, nonchalantly, making it sound incredibly phony. "Really!" she assures, as a result of the rest of the group's doubtful looks. Still sceptical, Gilahad redirects his focus back to Evan, moving on.

"I also need you to promise me you'll stay hidden," he says. "Those are my conditions."

"I can do that, absolutely," he responds. "But what about Ollie?"

In tandem, everyone turns towards the massive animal, standing even taller than Darashan, the largest of the bunch.

"...can he fight?" he asks in a whisper, hoping not to somehow offend him.

"Can you?" Evan says, extending the question towards the beast, who answers it by showing off his front talons, roaring loudly enough that Gilahad wonders if the enemy might've heard – luckily, Intelligence, also known as Darashan, says no.

He sighs, saying, "Alright, then," his pungent reluctance seeping into his voice as he leads everyone towards the crashed wagon, "let's get this over with."

The group of extorters starts to look up, as our merry band confidently strides up to them, seemingly paying no attention to the intimidating aura they hoped to be giving off.

"Is something the matter here?" Gilahad speaks up, making sure to announce his presence as he approaches the other group of people.

"I--" the driver, a stubby, well-groomed man, who's clearly not strapped for cash, tries to respond, looking relieved at what might be an opportunity to get out of the pinch he'd found himself in. Before he can get a significant word out, the apparent leader of the opposition, a fierce, rugged man with a bitter scowl, extends an arm out in front of the driver's stomach, an action intended as a signal, instantly shutting him up. The leader makes sure to face the palm of his hand towards the party, so as not to reveal the rune on the back, keeping his prima

firmly hidden. As a result, a symbol, mirroring the prima runes, is visible on his hand: a circle with a line connecting the top, left, right and bottom in the shape of a lightning bolt.

In a heartbeat, he switches to a polite smile, as if his previous expression had never even existed, as he responds to Gilahad in place of the periled driver.

“Nothing you need concern yourself with, stranger. My friends and I have it perfectly under control.”

“The thing is,” Gilahad continues, giving no heed to the leader’s proclamation, “we spotted the situation a while ago, while walking on the road over yonder and, weirdly enough, there doesn’t seem to have been *any* progress *whatsoever* towards getting the poor man out of his predicament.

“Luckily, it just so happens that we are loaning this beautiful, strong beast here,” he gestures towards Ollie, “who would be able to fix this issue up in a jiffy, so that we can all move on. Correct me if I’m wrong, but that would be quite ideal, wouldn’t you say?” He aims the question at the end towards the driver, who quickly nods in response. Meanwhile, the faux-polite smile of the extortionist leader twitches in frustration.

“It seems you’ve misunderstood, – and, correct me if I’m wrong – *Old man*: when I said we had it under control, I was not just *asking* you to leave.” As he said this, the leader had stopped bothering to pretend his eyes were smiling along with his mouth.

“No, you’re quite right, I’ve lived many a decade longer than you, which is how I’ve learned, for example, not to pay too much attention to things said by people who are clearly full of shit.” Gilahad responds. When the leader scowls at the scathing remark, obviously bypassing any pretend civility, Gilahad feigns a realization.

“Oh, I don’t mean you with that, of course. I understand you might think it was aimed at you, but I had no such intention.”

At this point, the leader, seemingly almost frothing at the mouth, drops any and all pretence.

“Alright, let me be abundantly clear with you all, since you seem to be too preoccupied with acting the fool to take a goddamned hint.” He now points specifically at the mark on his palm, leaving all subtlety behind. “This here, means we serve under Thunder - and you know what that means, right?” he says, as he dramatically steps forward, attempting to seem threatening. “You mess with *us*, you get burnt.”

Before Gilahad can respond to this obvious threat, a chuckle can be heard coming from behind him. Upon closer inspection, the source is Aldira, who unwillingly let her voice escape.

“What’s so funny?” the fierce man exclaims in response, questioning the rogue.

“Oh, nothing at all,” she non-committedly answers, shrugging it off, although one could still clearly see the symptoms of a held-back laugh in the curls of her smile.

“Didn’t sound like nothing,” the man argues.

“Yes,” Gilahad concurs, letting a light tinge of anger sneak into his voice, as a subtle hint, “please do clarify, *in a civilised manner*, whatever it might have been that caused this outburst.”

“No, it’s really nothing much,” she clarifies, “I simply ended up unwittingly cracking up at the thought of *you*,” she puts extra emphasis on this word, to the point that it becomes almost taunting, “thinking you can threaten *us*. I simply couldn’t help it.”

With this remark being spoken, all of the extortionist leader’s anger and discontent at Gilahad is immediately redirected towards the person who had the gall to mock him so openly. Gilahad – who had expressly told her *not* to turn it into a fight – has become similarly irritated at her behaviour, nearly reaching his boiling point to what he’d allow of her antics.

However, before he could scold her, or apologise to the man for his companion’s misconduct, the man already speaks up, as if he had just been waiting for an excuse to finally get to the inevitable result of their interaction.

“Then, let’s test that theory, shall we!” he exclaims, pointing at Aldira, as if to make extra clear whose theory he’s speaking of.

It only takes a moment before they realise that this was only a disguise for the *true* intention of the gesture: out of nowhere, two arrows whiz at the quick-witted rogue, who instinctively contorts her body, dodging out of the way of the hazards, while simultaneously starting a charge forward at the oppositional leader. She successfully evades one of the arrows, but the other one manages to graze her arm, which slows her juxtaposition of defence and offence just enough that she doesn’t reach the enemy in time, before he jumps back to dodge.

She clicks her tongue in disappointment, as the other members of the newly begun fight finally begin to move as well, their slower reactions only now catching up.

“Give me a flame!” Gilahad orders, as Aldira backs off, taking refuge from the inevitable counterattack behind her allies. Simultaneously, Evelyn runs forward, taking her place next to Gilahad and letting a wild flame sprout from her hand, held out in front of him.

“Charge!” the opposing leader orders, with a fitting gesture, in an attempt to take back the initiative they’d lost as a result of Aldira’s swift response. His soldiers do just that, obeying without question, pulling out their weapons as they begin their assault.

They’re unsuccessful, however, as Gilahad expels large amounts of force towards Evelyn’s fire, raining flames upon the unsuspecting enemies, as the two form a sort of impromptu reverse waterspout – a firespout, if you will.

“Get back!” the response immediately sounds. “Elementals, wall us off!”

What appears to be the enemies’ Nature users duck to the floor in tandem, sprouting a solid layer of dirt in front of them, creating a barrier which the retreating soldiers manage to hide behind in the nick of time, protecting them from the cinderful onslaught.

Noticing the ineffectiveness of the attack, Gilahad ceases to channel his magic, saving his energy. At the same time, he shouts at the man cowering by his wagon.

“Run! Get out of here!” he yells.

“What about my cargo!” the man argues.

“You can come back for it later! Just get out for now!” In response to this, the man nods, quickly scurrying away. Gilahad then turns to Aldira, quickly remarking on her actions.

“Thanks for that,” he says. “You realised they were aiming arrows at me, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” she seamlessly lies, covering up the fact that she actually did simply fail to stifle her laughter.

As they perform this exchange, Ollie decides to break the minor stalemate by flying up and crashing violently into the enemies’ improvised encampment, causing them to break their formation in an attempt to dodge the attack. Darashan attempts to take advantage of the ensuing chaos by conjuring a bow and strongly launching an arrow at one of the enemies, but it’s deflected by the responsive leader, who takes back command within seconds.

“Elementals, engage the griffin from afar! You,” he gestures towards the soldier he just saved, “safeguard them, but try to keep your distance: the beast will overpower you the moment he gets the chance.” The soldier nods, and joins up with the two Nature users, who are bombarding Ollie with icicles.

“Bowmen, don’t let them use another flame attack!” he yells into the air. Everyone else, follow me into the fray! Don’t give them any time to think!”

Gilahad frowns at the opposing leader’s reactivity and quick wit, as this second attack has come too fast for him to have already formulated a plan.

“Can you protect us while we flamethrower?” he asks Darashan, who quickly rejects the option.

“The archers moved; I couldn’t hear where to.”

“Shit,” Gilahad mutters under his breath, realising they may have underestimated their enemy, who’ve responded expertly to the bits of a plan they’d crafted while approaching, in case of this situation.

“Evelyn, take the one on the left, Darashan the next two, Aldira the one on the right,” he says, assigning roles. “I’ll take the leader. Be mindful of attacks from the archers!”

“Affirmative!” the group responds, going out to fight their chosen opponent. One person, however, didn’t follow the order to the letter.

Although the way Gilahad chose to divide enemies didn’t sound like anything special, that one person heard something else, something more, by reading between the lines: knowing Gilahad from far back, when they were still roaming with just him, herself and Darashan, there’s no way he would make Darashan fight two people alone, yet only have her take on one. Instead, he would’ve kept Darashan and her together to fight three enemies in a joint effort, therefore he must want her to do something else on top of it – such sounds the message Aldira read in Gilahad’s words.

The final add-on, ‘be mindful of attacks from the archers,’ that must be the hint towards who he *actually* wanted her to fight. Following this train of thought, she charges at the shrubbery, in the rough direction that the initial arrows had been fired from. As she does this, she makes sure to glance back and gauge the reaction of her assigned opponent, who chases her, panicked, after the realisation of her target dawns on him.

The reason she does this, is to know whether or not her opponent made the logical decision or not: if they’d disregarded her decision and joined their allies to focus and whittle down upon the outnumbered enemy, it wouldn’t be difficult to break through their ranks one by one. If the leader were unengaged, that is exactly the order he would’ve given, which would’ve

ensured the safety of the bowmen, who apply a constant threat upon the group, by forcing Aldira to hold her positions and help her allies.

The leader, however, is currently being occupied by Gilahad, ensuring he couldn't keep command. As such, the conditions for Aldira's gambit are met, and she follows through with the hunt.

Luckily for her, her original opponent isn't the only one who slips up in bewilderment: for a moment, she notices the unnatural rustling of leaves, indicating a hidden person, and she instantly reacts by launching one of her knives at the spot that sourced the disturbance. This action is met with a painful yelp, marking its success, moments before a counterattack arrives from the other archer. Unfortunately for the enemy, this is well within her expectations, noticeable by an expert evasion.

As she finishes this movement, however, she's suddenly met with a sharp pain in her shoulder, despite already having dodged the predicted counter: the reason for this is that she'd had yet another arrow fired at her, this one aimed at the location to which she was dodging, when it was already impossible to evade.

Once again relying on pure instinct, she managed to move just enough to prevent her heart being pierced, avoiding a fatal blow at the very least, but her acrobatics to avoid the onslaught had left her other assailant enough time to catch up and, with a slash of his sword, dish out a deep cut in her side, before she's able to jump back, creating some distance.

"Why the hell was there a third one!" she angrily mutter-shouts under her breath, as she looks back at the person she hit with her thrown weapon, who is now rising from his hiding spot.

The person reveals himself, tossing the knife that was caught in his stomach to the side and covering his wound, which, much to Aldira's surprise and dismay, swiftly stopped bleeding. This person never was one of the archers, nor was it a Sky user, as would be expected from a bowman, no, it was a healer, who hid there, possibly for this exact situation, as bait – or, more likely, to keep them safe from enemy attacks. Either way, as Aldira dodges out of the way of yet another projectile, she finds herself approached by not just the swordsman she'd been assigned to, but also the Nature user, who now revealed his aptness to lie not just in healing, but also in control of the elements, as fire sprouts from his hands.

Having gotten herself in a pinch she may not be able to get herself out of so easily, Aldira looks back at her companions, seeing if there were anyone who could assist her over here.

Evelyn, who has far less combat experience than the rest of them, is completely occupied fighting her opponent, trying her best to keep a distance and cast from out of reach.

Gilahad, who'd engaged the leader precisely to keep him from further delegating his soldiers, is, inversely, in the exact same position as the enemy commander.

Ollie is still raging about, trying to break out of the stalemate he's found himself in against his three opponents, who seem perfectly content to slowly chip away at him.

Only Darashan, who'd conjured a brawler type weapon, in the form of giant hands around his hand – power gloves is the term he'd coined for them – to quickly overpower his outnumberment, reacts to the situation, knocking back his opponents long enough to summon a bow, nailing one of the distracted archers, who screams in pain, before discarding his newly-

formed weapon just in time to defend himself from his foes, who've now recovered and come back to engage the giant again.

Thanks to Darashan's efforts, the situation is slightly improved for Aldira, but she's nevertheless gravely injured, outnumbered and down one dagger. Her situation is perilous indeed, and she feels the fear for her life beginning to take over. And yet, she grins in the face of that adversity, taunting the opponent – in such a way that it's impossible to tell whether it's bluffingly or not:

"You think you've got me cornered, don't you?" she says. "Well, let me tell you, I've stared death in the face a few times already," she suddenly grimaces, as she coughs, causing the sting from her side to painfully flair up. However, with blood freshly extracted from her body now on her hand, she shows off another toothy grin as she continues, shrugging it off.

"And, compared to those times," she breathes heavily, "this barely counts as a goddamn warm-up!" for a second, the enemies are stunned, causing Aldira to continue her taunt.

"Come on then, you bastards! Bring it! I'll take you all on!" she yells, letting out what seems like a battle cry.

In that moment, watching what they thought to be a helpless opponent on the edge of her life challenge them, roaring like a lion that had been injured in a cowardly sneak attack, and was now ready to start his counteroffensive, the enemies are left momentarily stunned, incapable of advancing, leaving the initiative for Aldira to take.

Before Aldira can make a move, however, their paralysis changes to puzzlement, as the soldiers stare confusedly past their fearful opponent. Noticing this, Aldira pounces upon the opportunity, lunging forward.

Just as she does this, however, two arms wrap around her from behind, holding her back from the movement. She feels her wounds rapidly close up, as the physis flows through her from the peculiar, yet familiar technique.

"There, that should be better," she hears from behind her in a gentle voice. "Here," he adds on, holding up the knife she'd thrown at the enemy, who had discarded it somewhere randomly on the ground.

It was, of course, Evan, who'd come to assist her in escaping the pinch she'd found herself in.

"Yeah, okay, sure." She mumbles, flustered at the unexpected action from the stray human they'd picked up on the streets, as her fight-or-flight feelings start to wear off with the soothing effect of the healing magic.

Without even thinking, she begins another lunge at the enemies, feeling simultaneously reinvigorated and drained, leaving her in a temporary auto-state. She quickly shakes it off, however, returning to her best senses as she halts her advance.

"Scratch that," she exclaims, "we have to join back up with the rest. You're in danger here."

While she says this, the enemies finally recover from their state of bewilderment, shouting, "Reinforcements! An enemy healer has arrived!"

This causes the two leaders, who'd both felt they were benefitting from the stalemate between them, to look over and re-evaluate the situation. Gilahad is the first to act – although he puts on a large frown at the news before he ever does anything.

“Everyone, regroup! Evelyn, cover us!” he shouts out.

Once this call is made, everyone immediately dashes for the side of the road, Aldira grabs Evan by the hem of his shirt to drag him along with her, leaving him powerless in the girl's grasp. With difficulty, he *does* manage to let out a whistle, however, calling back the beast who'd broken suddenly into the enemy line.

“Stop them, don't let them regroup!” the enemy commander orders, prompting his soldiers to make chase. The group is, however, already too far away for most of them to properly reach, which, combined with the threat of being picked off by the griffin flying overhead, makes the leader change his approach.

“Never mind that, come back here! We're using that flame technique they used! Let's roast 'em!” he now commands, and the two Nature users that had been engaging Ollie now congregated around the leader, sprouting two flames, after which two other enemies, supposedly Sun users, run up to take position behind them.

“Make a wall, quick!” Gilahad orders, after everyone but Aldira has reconvened. Evelyn quickly follows this order, creating a sloped wall of soil, similar to what the opponents had done earlier. Aldira joins them, tossing Evan – who's promptly caught by Darashan – over the barrier, before jumping it herself. As the fire starts to crackle, slithering past the barrier, it's clear that the group is, indeed, starting to feel the heat.

“I thought I told you to stay hidden!” Gilahad lashes out at Evan.

“But...it looked like Aldira was in trouble...” he dejectedly mutters.

“Aldira in a pinch is nothing but Aldira about to overcome a pinch!” he yells, before leaning back, as he seems to calm down a little. “But you wouldn't know that, would you?” he continues, reasoning that he may have done the exact same in Evan's position.

Evan weakly shakes his head, before Aldira joins to elder's side, putting a hand on Gilahad's shoulder to take his attention.

“It's fine, Gilly,” she says, confidently grinning, “he was quite helpful.”

Gilahad takes a moment to survey the look on her face.

“It seems you've got a plan brewing, don't you?” he questions.

“Yep.”

“Does this plan involve taking out the archers?” he continues an impromptu game of twenty questions.

“Yep.”

“And does it involve the rest of us engaging the other enemies, just as we normally would?”

“Yep.”

“Then I’m on board,” he decides, putting his trust in his younger companion. “Darashan, can you pinpoint where they’re casting the fire from?” he asks, turning to his taller companion, who simply nods, before pointing at two points in the wall – presumably where the enemies would be.

“Alright then, here’s the plan,” he announces, still covered in the sounds of the raging flames. “Darashan and I will take aim at the Nature users who are using the flamethrower. Ollie will crash through the wall, which is when Darashan and I will snipe the two elementals, and then he’ll collapse on their ranks, just like he did earlier. The rest of us will charge in to cause extra chaos, without paying too much attention to safety: if you get hurt, just back off to Evan to heal. I’ll stay back to defend him, while Aldira will do whatever it is she’s planning on. Is that confirmed?”

“Yes!” the rest say in tandem, except for Ollie, who roars passionately instead.

“Alright!” He shouts, riling everyone up. “Their flames should be out of juice in a moment! We go right away!”

As he says this, everyone gets in position. Ollie stands ready against the barrier to take off, destroying the wall with his flight. Evelyn and Aldira prepare to charge forward, while Gilahad takes the javelin off his back, preparing to throw it. Meanwhile, Evan looks on in wonder as Darashan’s power gloves disappear, morphing into two solid, Prussian blue blocks, which he then pushes together to form a sized bow, which he immediately pulls taut.

They hear the sounds of the flames weaken, as they steel themselves for their charge. The moment it dies out, the tension breaks as Ollie breaks the wall in one decisive movement, flying high into the air, while roaring intimidatingly. The attention of the enemies is forcefully pulled up high, distracting them from the rest of the group.

Channelling his Sun magic to propel the spear even harder forward, Gilahad launches the weapon with great force at his target, while Darashan releases the string of his formed bow.

The projectiles are set perfectly to nail their targets, who are distracted by the majestic, yet fierce beast in the air.

“Watch out!” the enemy commander exclaims, the only one to keep focus on all his enemies. He attempts to push his allies out of the way of the projectiles flying at them, but it’s only partly effective: they don’t get stricken in the heart, but the arrow and javelin get firmly caught in the opponents’ shoulders, their great force propelling the enemies backwards at a high speed.

Before the projectiles had even connected, Darashan had already started to prepare his next move: he unmorphed the bow, once again recreating the gloves. At the same time, however, he also pulls out another one of the stones that his gloves had previously morphed into, which he turns into a spear, handing it over to Gilahad.

“Thanks,” the recipient says, before Darashan charges forward to engage the enemy directly, together with Evelyn, while Ollie, still up in the air, begins a divebomb, barrelling at the enemies’ ranks, just as their attention is pulled back to the elves.

With perfect timing, the three simultaneously collapse upon the opponents.

“Don’t panic, we still outnumber them!” the leader orders, trying to calm down his now panicked soldiers. “Healer, we need you over here!”

The enemy’s physician, the one who Aldira had previously hit with a dagger, comes out of the shrubbery, where he’d once again hidden himself, and runs towards the elementals, who’d been hit by Gilahad’s javelin and Darashan’s arrow.

Aldira, however, who’d been completely unseen during the whole charge, suddenly comes out from behind Darashan’s far larger frame: she’d been holding onto his back, much like a baby monkey holding onto its mother, allowing her to stay out of sight of the clump of enemies, who Darashan’s running straight at.

Pulling out her daggers, she prepares to intercept the healer, which would mean the elementals, who were too out of it to heal themselves – if they even could use physis – wouldn’t be a factor for the rest of the fight. The reason she goes for this is, of course, to create what is, in battle theory, often considered to be an absolute win condition: when your side has an active healer, but the enemy doesn’t, meaning you’ll almost always win in the long run.

As such, Aldira charges towards the enemy physician, doubling as the same direction the bowmen are in. The enemy archers, also realising what the nimble rogue was looking to do, decide they have to try and stop her.

The enemy healer, in an attempt to protect himself from the charge, musters a fire attack, throwing it as far as he could in between them. Aldira however, dodges out of the way without breaking a sweat. The leader, surveying the battlefield, looks over to the charging girl, threatening their last still able healer, when something seems to dawn on him.

“It’s just an illusion!” he shouts, as a signal to the hidden bowmen not to shoot, but it comes too late: two arrows whiz through the air, making to nail the fake Aldira in the head and in the chest – two perfect shots, but alas, they fly straight through, bouncing dully off the ground.

Now, with the locations of the hidden enemies revealed, for the real Aldira, the hunt can finally begin: only a few short seconds pass before she’s located the first one, a fact discernible by a loud scream. Although no other cries are heard after, Aldira exits the greenery from a different spot, looking extremely self-satisfied, possibly due to having made up for her earlier failure.

In the meantime, Darashan is still in the focal point of the chaos, a hectic fight unfolding all around him. He hits one of the opponents smackdab in the middle of the chest, with a wide swing, knocking the wind out of him as he falls over. As he does this, however, the enemy leader sees an opening, stabbing him deep in his leg, causing him to grit his teeth in pain. He makes to retreat, but the commander pursues him, pressing on, until Evelyn intervenes, coming between them with a vertical sweep, trailing fire along the swing.

“Thanks.” Darashan mutters, as he continues his retreat back to their healer, who’s still sitting behind Gilahad. An observant eye could even see him shivering.

“You doing okay down there?” Gilahad asks the quivering human.

“...yeah, I’m fine,” he answers, trying to act strong, but it’s more than obvious he isn’t really. Evan also seem to realise this, however, so he begins to elaborate.

“Maybe I’m not entirely fine,” he admits. “Being in the middle of this bloodshed and chaos...hearing enemies scream in pain...it’s really, *really* frightening – and I’m not even on the receiving end of it.”

“Yeah, it’s way too much to handle,” Gilahad responds, as his eyes scan the battlefield. “At first, that is.” A silence falls between them, their ally still approaching them from the centre of conflict.

“We are doing the right thing, right?” Evan subduedly wonders. After a short second passes, Gilahad answers, trying to sound as decisive as possible.

“Yes, we are.”

“Hm.” Evan says, acknowledging the response as he takes it in. He’s long since stopped shaking, as he had been before. Resolutely, he rises to his feet.

“Then, I’ll believe that and stand tall!” he proclaims, putting on a brave face – all be it one that still clearly shows cracks.

Suddenly, a spear comes flying straight at his face, making him yelp in surprise, before Gilahad blocks it with his shield. Searching for the source of the weapon, he finds the commander, looking very frustrated. It seems he’d hoped to either snipe the retreating Darashan, who’d deftly stepped out of the way, or strike out their healer. First, Gilahad scoffs at the enemy, who becomes even more visibly irritated, before Evelyn sweeps back in to engage him again. With a soft smile, Gilahad encourages the boy behind him.

“Stay strong,” he simply says, and Evan responds with a determined nod, as Darashan finally reaches them.

“Watch out,” he speaks up as he arrives. “It seems their commander’s of the Sun.”

“Yeah, and he’s skilled at both anima and psyche as well. He’s a dangerous man,” Gilahad acknowledges, recognising his opponent’s skill. “Still, it’s weird to see a Sun user fight with a sword.”

“To each their own.” Darashan curtly responds, as Evan’s arms envelop his midriff, – they couldn’t reach much higher – while he prepares his healing.

The leader, meanwhile, watching the deep wound he’d inflicted on the enemy be closed with such ease, compared to his own physician, who’d reached their side, but is struggling to keep up with the rate of injury, realises that this is not a battle of attrition they’re set to win. As such, he makes the call.

“We take out the healer!”

As he speaks these words, Gilahad looks over to watch him extend his sword, directing his soldiers towards the three on stand-by. Dutifully, they follow the order, charging in the appointed direction.

Ollie, seemingly perceiving the danger to the life of his beloved friend and owner, makes to retreat to his side. He is, however, intercepted by one of the enemy elementals, who’d managed to return to the world of the living, having recovered thanks to the efforts of their physician. Evelyn tries to prevent the enemy march, running up to them to attack, but her assault is evaded, and she receives a counter in the form of an elbow to the chest. Luckily, she’s able to

jump back as she's hit, putting her out of harm's way, but she's unable to keep her balance, causing her to roll violently across the ground, finally ending up a bit away from her companions, although still in their rough direction.

Evan sees this and, mustering his courage, runs across the battlefield, wanting to put her back on her feet as well.

"Wait!" Gilahad yells at him, trying to stop him from splitting off, but being unsuccessful in doing so. He tries to give chase, but is forced to block an enemy attack, as the opponents reach his location.

Counting the enemies before him, however, he concludes that there are no opposing soldiers left, besides the ones that had come over: if he keeps himself between them and Evan, it won't be long before Evelyn returns to the fight. Ollie also doesn't seem to need much longer before he can break out, and Aldira's still quickly approaching them. If this situation keeps up, they'll surround the remaining enemies, which would undoubtably lead to their victory.

Darashan, as well, seems to realise this and postures himself next to his ally, turning one of his gloves into a small shield, attached to his wrist. At this point, the two are confident – possibly *over* – in their success.

Suddenly Gilahad has a realisation, as he looks at the enemy commander. He knows the man is no fool, as he's shown consistent good judgement throughout the course of the battle. Right now, however, he's standing behind his soldiers, not fighting along, but also not giving out any more orders, despite the fact that he, too, should realise the disadvantage he's at.

And yet, he's completely silent.

Then, suddenly, he hears a distressed voice sound out from behind him. A voice he identifies to be Evelyn's, calling out the name of their newfound ally.

"Evan!"

Looking behind him, he quickly realises he has made a fatal error in his judgement, as he sees the scene unfolding there: the enemy commander has the human boy pinned on the ground, with his sword aimed downward, poised to cut right through the kid's neck.

At witnessing this, time seems to slow down to a crawl – not just for Gilahad, but for every single person in the battle, who's attentions were all simultaneously brought upon the human and his assailant, as a result of Evelyn's yell.

The grave mistake Gilahad had made lays heavily on his mind, as he sees its result start to play out before him: Gilahad, after seeing the ferocious man not only point out Aldira's illusion, but also toss a spear in his direction, had presumptuously assumed him to be of the Sun prima, as he seemed to use both *opsis*, a technique to see through illusions, reserved for Sun users, as well as force, often used to more effectively guide and empower a thrown javelin.

In reality, however, this was all part of an elaborate ruse: the commander had manually seen through the illusion, and had simply thrown the spear without propelling it with additional force, created by Sun anima magic, all to bait our group into thinking he had a different prima than he did.

And Gilahad had fallen for it, hook line and sinker. He had neglected to confirm that the man was, indeed, of the Sun prima, simply assuming it to be so, and it has now come back to bite

him in the ass. In reality, the leader is an illusionist, and the man standing with the other soldiers is, similarly, an illusion, a deception similar to what Aldira had pulled earlier in the battle, and the real one is now threatening Evan's life, with not a single person left to stop him.

With an agonised heart, Gilahad looks on as the man's sword comes down towards the boy on the ground, who instinctively, but futilely, raises his hands to shield his face.

The sword clangs on the ground, as everyone witnesses the scene unfold. Much to their surprise, however, it hasn't pierced any flesh; instead, somehow, it seemed to have bent off-course midway down.

The obvious question immediately arises – how? There's no wind to blow it astray, nor did something strike the sword, so what could it have been? Only one possibility comes to mind, one that none of the onlookers could really believe: the healer, clearly of the Nature prima, had used Sun magic to create force from his hand, which were still above his head to protect it, pushing the sword away from himself. That, then, would mean the boy has aptitude in two different primas. And not a single person present doesn't know what that fact would entail.

While everyone continues to stare breathlessly at the scene, a certain rogue is the first to make a move, as the passage of time slowly drifts back to its usual pace.

With huge, decisive strides, she crosses the battlefield, reaching the focal point of everyone's stares, as she tackles the man who had pinned the human boy – quickly turned object of wonder – down, turning the tables. She now has *him* on the ground instead, but, rather than a sword pointed at his throat, she has two daggers hugging it close.

"That's right, you saw exactly what you think you saw!" she exclaims, making sure to do so loudly enough that no one would miss it, confirming the suspicion that had taken the whole crowd by storm with her next words.

"The saviour has come!" she continues. "And you know what that means, don't you?"

Although this question flies self-evidently in every enemy's direction, it's most specifically aimed at the commander, who had so proudly flown the symbol of Thunder, just before the battle had broken out. He lies there, incapable of moving, not only due to Aldira's expert hold on him, but also out of sheer dumbfoundment – a state he's in not as a result of confusion, but an inability to accept the reality he's found himself in.

The saviour has come, in the unbelievable form of a mere human boy, bringing with him the end of an era for the followers of Thunder – that's what it means, and they *do* know it.

For a moment, every opposing soldier quivers in their boots, before Aldira continues her monologue.

"However, despite your, at best, *audacious* attempt to fight us, threatening our very livelihood!" she says, pumping up her voice with every single word she spits at the commander, until she finally reaches a boiling point, after which she takes a short break, softening her voice before continuing.

"It is completely within our hearts to allow you to scurry away with your collective tails between your legs," she faux-forgivingly offers, "on one condition: when you return to your master, make sure to tell him the following,"

She now closes the distance between herself and the person she's pinned down, lowering her voice to the point that only he can bypass the inaudibility of her words, feeling the threatening tone down to his very bones.

"The saviour's coming for you, and he won't stop 'till you've been completely removed from this timeline," she says, before returning to a sweet smile, which, at this point, is much scarier for the already terrified leader. "Do you understand?"

In a panic, he frantically nods his head. Aldira lets off the pressure and sits up, allowing him to move again.

"Then scram."

Scooting away from his assailant, he pointlessly shouts "Retreeeeeat!" – his soldiers had long since made up their minds to do so, the moment they got the chance. They all dash away, full speed, stopping only to sling their wounded over their shoulders, before speeding off again.

"Well done, Aldira," Gilahad compliments, as he, and the others, convene around Aldira and Evan. "I don't think those guys will be goons of Thunder much longer."

"Ah, I almost forgot!" she says, as she runs to the other side of the road and into the shrubbery, where the bowmen had been hidden during the fight. A few moments after her form vanishes behind the green, she reappears, dragging another person with her.

It's one of the archers, specifically the one who'd mysteriously stopped participating in the battle, apparently as a result of Aldira tying his hands together with rope.

"I captured one!"

With this revelation, Gilahad's eyes light up even more.

"You're the best, Aldira," he says, being reminded of the reason he puts up with her constant antics.

"Eh, it was nothing," she shrugs, lying; it had been far from easy to detain the man, after all.

Leaving that exchange behind, as not to stroke Aldira's ego too much, Gilahad turns to their new prisoner, who fearfully looks into his eyes, as he swallows.

"Don't worry, li'l fella," Gilahad says to him, "we only have a couple questions for you, nothing more. Okay?"

The man nods.

"Good, good." Gilahad smiles for a moment, before returning to his stern face. "Then, first off, how come a gang of Thunderites is here, in the west, even though Thunder's castle is all the way to the east?"

"Th-the master sent squad's all over," the captive stammers in response, "mostly new recruits with an experienced general."

"I guess he wants to expand his sphere of influence?" Evelyn, who'd come over after healing her wounds, surmises. Gilahad ponders this conclusion, which had been his first thought as well, before opting to simply ask.

“Is that the case?” he interrogates.

“I don’t know,” the captive exclaims. “I only know the commander had a list of targets, mainly nobles and merchants.”

“And what did he *do* with these targets?”

“H-he pestered them, trying to extract fake tolls, stopping them on the streets, that kind of thing.”

Gilahad is confused at his response, as he can’t seem to lock down their intentions, and, looking at his allies, they seem equally lost. He continues his questioning.

“Do you have any idea why?”

“I’m just a grunt,” he exclaims, “I’m not told any of those things!”

“...really?” Gilahad responds, sounding both sceptical and very pissed. “You’ve got no idea, *whatsoever*?”

“N-no,” he stammers, nervously. In response, Gilahad turns to Aldira.

“Do you believe him?” he asks, rhetorically.

“No, not at all,” she says, answering the self-evident question. “Maybe righty can convince him to talk a little more?” she suggests.

“Now *that*, is a good suggestion,” he responds, as the two simultaneously turn back to the captive, Aldira moving her hand to the appropriate sheath, dangling from her side.

“No, wait,” he anxiously sputters, “I-I think I heard the commander mutter something about the hunt for storm-children once. Maybe that had something to do with it?” he weakly offers, but it finally makes the penny drop for Gilahad, who now has a satisfied smile on his face.

“So Thunder wants to build an army of his kin, huh?”

“Please, it’s all I know! Don’t hurt me!” the captive scaredly exclaims, as the contented look on Gilahad’s face is – understandably – misconstrued as one of a man with no-good intentions.

Hearing this, Gilahad immediately decides enough is enough – the reason for this being that he’s starting to feel a bit too much like he’s the real villain here. Sorrily, he turns around and walks off, saying, “Take it away,” to Aldira, who he knows must feel similarly.

“Ah—aaaaah!” the captive screams, closing his eyes, as he interprets the line *very* differently.

Realising this, Aldira squats down, meeting his eye level, attempting to reassure him.

“Don’t worry, cutie,” she says softly putting her hands on his cheeks, as he stops yelling. “I would never hurt a handsome face like yours.”

The captive, confused at suddenly being complimented, simply looks her in the eye, with a faint blush – as he’s not used to being come on to.

“That is,” she continues, at noticing he’s calmed down. “unless I’m left with no choice, if you catch my meaning. So, can you promise me you’ll never force me to?”

He fervently nods.

“Good.” She smiles sweetly as she says this, still not breaking eye-contact, before finally starting to close the distance between their faces. Surprised, but welcoming, the captive shuts his eyes.

After a few moments of, surprisingly, being met with no additional sensations, he opens his eyes to see Aldira standing upright, folding the rope that had been binding him around her hands.

“Were you waiting for something?” she teases.

He shakes his head, mildly disappointed, before running off in embarrassment.

“Let’s go on a date next time!” Aldira yells after him, as he disappears into the distance.

Turning around, she joins up with the other elves.

“Well then,” she suggests, “shall we celebrate another hard-earned victory?”

Gilahad grins, saying, “Sounds like a plan to me!”

The other two, however, don’t seem to share their enthusiasm, looking off to the side. Aldira and Gilahad follow their gazes to determine the cause of this. What they find is the final participant in the battle, stroking Ollie’s fur in the distance with a melancholy look covering his face.

“What do you think’s up with him?” Aldira says, posing the question fresh on all of their minds out loud.

“The bittersweet satisfaction of a first victory would be my guess,” Gilahad responds, downplaying what could be something severe.

“...I think it might be a tad more serious issue,” Evan says, rejecting the suggestion thrown into the open. “We should go talk to him.”

Immediately, and decisively, Aldira strides over to him.

“You okay there, buddy?” Aldira loudly asks, still riding off her enthusiasm from the victory, as the rest of the group also approaches Evan.

“...I’m alright,” he despondently answers. “I was just...wondering about something.”

“Hm?” Aldira emotes. “Well, shoot! We said we’d answer any questions you have, right?”

“Yeah...”

Evan sighs – mustering up some courage, maybe? – before posing his reluctant query.

“What’s the saviour?” he asks.

“The saviour?” Aldira smiles wide. “It’s a person unlike anyone else on this planet, capable of controlling every prima,” she zealously responds, still incapable of locking down why Evan sounds so dejected. She, in her excitement – not just about the victory, but about having found the saviour, who they’ve been traveling the continent to find – is trying to share her energy with him, a role she often takes on in the group

“I see...” Evan mutters. “And you’re saying I am that person?”

“That’s right! Isn’t it amazing?” she continues to chatter on.

“So that’s why you approached me to join your party?”

When Evan says this, Aldira stops in her tracks, like she just found out she’s standing on a minefield – which may not be entirely false. Finally understanding where Evan’s going, she immediately decides that she’s insensitively blabbered more than enough.

Instead, hesitantly, Evelyn responds.

“Yes, you’re right.”

Sounding what might be angry, for the very first time since they met him, – which, in reality, is much shorter than they feel – Evan confronts them.

“So you lied to me?”

Like a deer in the headlights, Evelyn goes completely silent, just like the rest, who don’t dare speak a word.

“...that’s right,” she finally gets across. “I’m sorry.”

With the truth laid bare, Evan turns away from them, so no one can look him in the eye and see his expression, one that, the rest surmise, is surely one of sadness and disappointment.

“That’s okay,” he lies, hiding his unease and discontent under the phrase. “I’d just like some time alone,” he says, as he begins to mount his animal companion.

A fear quickly overtakes the group: one that, were Evan to take off here, he’d never return, prompting Gilahad to attempt to reach out to him, stretching his arm towards the boy’s shoulder as he speaks up.

“Wait, we can—” he says, but is interrupted when his arm is smacked away – an action he’d never expected to see from the polite and apologetic human he’s come to know.

Evan seems as shocked at the deed as Gilahad does, but he quickly shrugs it off, sitting down upon the griffin and taking hold of the reins. He looks over the elves one last time, taking their wordlessness as silent affirmation, before lightly tugging the reins, beaconing their departure.

As the creature and its owner fly off, the ones left behind are overtaken by a feeling of helplessness, defeat and inadequacy – far from the vigorous mood that would be expected from the victors of a clash.

“Someone should go after him,” Darashan speaks up, breaking the sudden silence by voicing what everyone seems to be thinking – if no one follows him now, they’ll never be seeing him again.

Understandably, their next thought is who the person to go should be. In tandem, they quickly arrive at the obvious answer, and everyone looks in tandem at Aldira.

“Oh, bother,” Aldira immediately sputters, closing her eyes and resting her head in her hand as she sighs.

"You're the only one who can do it," Gilahad says. "You didn't even know about the whole saviour thing until this morning, so you've been interacting with him more sincerely than any of us – I think that counts for quite a lot," he reasons, and the rest nod along.

In response, Aldira simply sighs again. She, after all, did not sign up to clean up other people's mistakes – at least, not an unexciting one like this.

"Please." Evelyn also adds, her eyes almost begging.

"Oh, don't look at me like that!" Aldira expresses in frustration. "I'm already going, okay, I'm going!"

"Thank you, Aldira," Evelyn relievedly says, smiling so thankfully that the rogue becomes a little embarrassed, scratching her cheek and looking off into the distance.

"Just promise me one thing, okay," Aldira asks, offering up one last shred of resistance. "If I don't succeed, I want no blame whatsoever. No guilting, no chiding; zero liability. Alright?"

"Of course," Gilahad responds. "Do you really think we'd do that?"

"A little bit," she says, as she starts running in the direction Evan had flown off in. Squinting her eyes and seeing Ollie's figure descend in the distance, she turns around one last time to face her allies, who look anxiously in her direction.

"Don't worry, guys," she tells them, giving them a thumbs up. "I got this."

"Hm," they acknowledge, finding relief in the youngest member's reassurance, as she dashes off.

Evan sits with Ollie, a melancholy expression on his face, leaning into who might, as it turns out, still be his only friend.

"What do you think I should do, Ollie?" he quietly consults the griffin, who responds with a purr, as he snuggles his face into Evan's.

"Thanks, buddy," he says, petting the animal's head as he shows his appreciation for the consolation. "But it doesn't really help make up my mind."

"Maybe I can help with that?" a voice suddenly speaks out. Jumping a little in shock, Evan looks startledly up at a smiling Aldira, who'd sneaked up on him.

"Can I sit down?" she asks, gesturing towards the ground next to him. Still slightly flabbergasted, the boy nods, prompting Aldira to turn her eyes to Ollie, who seems angrier than Evan himself, but also concedes, making space for the girl to join them.

Aldira takes her seat, but doesn't say anything more.

After a long silence, Evan finally speaks up.

"Aren't you going to convince me not to leave?" he wonders.

"When did I say I'd do that?" she responds, with a stupefied tone of voice.

"You said you'd help make up my mind."

“Yeah, but I won’t tell you what’s right or wrong. I’ll just answer questions. Is that alright?”

“Hm,” he responds, a twitch of his mouth hinting at what might be the makings of a smile, due to the idea that he may finally get some answers to the questions plaguing his mind. “That’s perfect.”

“Well, ask away then,” she says, as another silence threatens to loom up while Evan considers what to query first.

“Then,” he begins, immediately jumping into the big question, “can you tell me what it really means to be the saviour?”

Aldira lets the question stir a bit, trying to find the best way to answer it.

“Gilly already told you about sight magic, right?” she finally asks.

“Yes?” Evan answers the seemingly unrelated question. “If I recall correctly, he said, ‘It allows you to manipulate your perception in all kinds of ways.’”

“Yeah, that’s right,” she nods. “One of those ways – an exceedingly rare one, mind you – lets one see things that have yet to happen. Future sight is what it’s called, and one who has it is called an oracle.”

“Okay?” Evan responds, still unsure of why this is being told to him.

“You must be wondering why I’m talking about this, right?”

Evan nods.

“Well, a very long time ago, an oracle was born with an exceptional talent for this branch of magic. Anything you asked her of your future, she could answer, and, without fail, it would always come true – unlike with many other oracles, where one had to be careful not to interfere with the vision. This legendary oracle only had one weakness, really: she couldn’t see the future without being asked a specific question.

“Many coveted the oracle’s powers, wishing to use it for their own good, but the oracle herself always continued to live a simple life, declining even the most generous offers of kings and emperors alike to join their court. She lived her whole life like that, as a fortune teller, answering any questions one had for a meagre compensation, flourishing in the modesty of her own existence. As she slowly grew old, however, she unfortunately began to be riddled with dementia, losing her ability to have coherent visions.

“One day, however, in a rare moment of lucidity, she, for the first time, saw an unprompted vision, one so strong that it bypassed even the one limit of her ability. What she saw was a future where Elbe was plagued by the forces of evil, following a nefarious ruler with a frightening mastery of thunder magic, abusing it to hold down all who opposed him. The people lived in constant fear of what he’d do.

“But, one day, someone would rise up to fight this fate, someone who could use not just thunder, but every other source of magic as well: the saviour, is what she called them, and he would rise once 100.000 moons had passed.”

Finally, after the long story, Aldira looks directly at Evan, intently listening along, and extends her finger in his direction.

“That’s you, Ev,” she says. “You are that person, and it’s your fate to rise up and fight Thunder.”

“But, but,” he sputters in protest, “why would I be someone amazing like that? I don’t know anything about the world and,” he scoffs, “just the idea of fighting someone frightens me.” He crawls into a ball, holding his knees in his arms. “Besides, I’m...just a human. There’s no way I’m some grand saviour.”

“And yet, here we are.”

Evan momentarily glances at Aldira, who’s smiling encouragingly at him, but, still clearly unconvinced, he goes back to trying to hide from the world. Aldira sighs. She does this, not out of annoyance, but out of frustration, because, maybe, she sees a little bit of herself in the boy, refusing to accept who he is – or rather, what he isn’t.

“*You* might not think you’re the right type of person,” she continues, putting a hand on Evan’s shoulder, “but *I* do.”

“...how?” he sceptically questions, coming out from his protection for a moment, although his pessimism still did not let him accept any recognition.

“Well, I don’t really know much about you,” she answers, “so I can’t say anything definite about who you really are or anything like that.” Due to the distance in these words, Evan feels urged to retreat to his shell again, but, for some reason unknown to him, he remains.

Noticing Evan is still attentive, Aldira continues.

“I can only talk about the person I’ve seen these past few days.” She looks into the distance. “I can only talk about the boy who, in a whole crowd of bystanders, was the only one who helped a suffering child. The boy who, the moment he saw someone in trouble, insisted on helping, no matter what. The boy who ran into the middle of a battlefield despite not being able to fight, because he thought a friend was in danger. The boy who can’t seem to be able to stop himself from helping those in need.”

She laughs a little.

“If that’s not saviour-like, then what the hell is?”

Evan seems lost for words at the – to him – excessive praise, opening his mouth to speak over and over again, but closing it before a sound escapes it, as Aldira’s words continue to stir in his mind.

“I just...” he finally says, but ends his sentence halfway. “I don’t know.”

Seeing his despondency, that inexorable self-doubt, resolutely stopping his mind from moving forward, Aldira decides there’s only one way forward in the conversation.

“Can I tell you another story?” she says. Although Evan doesn’t respond, she starts telling it anyway.

“There once was a girl,” she says, “born to a very noble house. The girl’s family were a great and accomplished people, respected and revered all over the continent. But the girl, herself, wasn’t quite like them. Or maybe she was, and the rest simply refused to accept it – who

knows? Nevertheless, she was never accepted as a true member of the family, despite being born to them all the same.

“She did, however, desperately *want* to be a part of the family. That’s why she worked tirelessly, doing her best to earn their approval. She took in any lessons like a sponge, building up as much experience and knowledge as she could, because she thought it would bring her closer to that goal.”

Aldira frowns as she says this, a profoundly sad expression covering her face before she continues.

“It didn’t. Every step towards recognition she took was thrown away, laughed at or – worst of all – completely ignored. But, unfazed – or so she liked to believe – she stepped on.”

“...couldn’t she see it wasn’t working?” Evan sheepishly asks.

“Of course she could!” Aldira responds. “But she was a part of the family, first and foremost, even if they didn’t accept that yet – or so she thought.”

Evan seems to think of something, but doesn’t say it out loud, so Aldira lets things be for a moment.

“Why be so loyal to people who don’t care?” he finally asks.

“That’s a good question, Ev, and I wouldn’t be able to answer it.” Then, Aldira shows a fond smile, like remembering a beloved childhood friend who moved away long ago.

“But one day,” she continues, “someone showed up who asked her that exact question, and, surprise surprise, she couldn’t answer it either. As she pondered the question, this person told her about the wide world out there, the things to be seen, the experiences to be had, and asked her again, ‘why be so loyal to people who don’t care?’ When, finally, she figured out she had no way to answer it, he eventually told her to stop bothering with them and live for herself.”

With that, Aldira shuts up, marking a slightly unsatisfying end to the story, causing Evan to ask on.

“And then what?”

“And then she did,” she shoots Evan a quick look. “Can you guess where she is now?”

“No?”

“Now, she’s out there, living her best goddamned life, that’s what! Don’t you think that’s better than anything?” she excitedly comes out with.

Before he can answer the rhetorical question, an obvious thought comes to mind, one upon which Evan hesitantly acts, after glancing Aldira’s way a few times.

“Are you the girl?” he asks.

“No!” she decisively responds, before conceding, “maybe.”

She shakes her head.

“It doesn’t really matter. Point is, it’s pointless to let yourself be held back by dumb thoughts.”

She now stands up, spreading her arms out wide as the sun suddenly starts beaming down on her frame, illuminating it, as the grass shudders and trees shudder around them in a gust of wind, in what seems like an almost magical moment to the human boy, inexperienced in the beauties of the world.

“There’s an endless world out there!” she speeches, pure, enthusiastic glee spouting off her voice, sticking to a quickly enamoured Evan. “And in our *endful* lives, we don’t have the time to be held down by anything, or anyone, lest we miss what could’ve been.” She now turns around to look at Evan, who futilely attempts to hide his mesmerisation, and says to him, “Don’t you think?”

When he responds with a nod, finally showing the genuine smile she had seen on him this morning, when he truly believed he’d made a whole new group of friends, she smiles back at him twice as wide.

“I’m sorry we lied to you,” she says, getting back to business while the mood is still favourable. “But, if you want, we can help you be the best saviour you can be – the one I *know* you can be. We can teach you magic while we roam the continent, and we can be your hands and feet while you navigate it, helping you help people,” she offers. “All we ask in return is that you help us defeat Thunder. Is that okay?”

Finally, resolutely, Evan stands up, responding to her plea, with the conviction he’d showed as he walked onto the battlefield earlier today.

“Yes,” he answers, before airing a single finger in front of her. “On one condition.”

“...and that is?” she asks, curious as to what he might want with it, when the boy suddenly comes out with a deep bow.

“I want you to teach me to be like the girl in the story!” he exclaims, causing Aldira to immediately raise a confused eyebrow at the unexpected proclamation.

“I said it wasn’t me, right?”

“Yes!” he excitedly responds. “But, just like her, you’re not held back by anything, right?”

“I wouldn’t say so, no,” she says, still slightly befuddled at his sudden burst of energy.

“Then, please teach me how to be like that!” At this point, the twinkle in his eye would make it impossible for anyone to refuse.

“I, uh,” she stammers, “don’t really know how to teach you something like that.”

“Yes!” he repeats, just as excitedly as last time. “That’s why, I’d like to watch how you do it!”

Aldira takes a moment to ponder this suggestion.

“So,” she says, questioningly, “I just have to do what I always do, then?”

“Yes, that’s right!”

“Man,” she sarcastically responds, “you might be asking a little too much of me there. I don’t know if I can do that much.”

“Oh...” he dejectedly responds, taking her words at face value, as he always does.

With a wry smile, she clarifies. “It was just a joke, Ev. Of course I can do that.”

“Really!” he exclaims, prompting Aldira to give a quick nod. Afterwards, he cheerfully pumps his fist, shouting, “Yes!”

“Pft,” Aldira lets out, laughing at the silliness of the sudden change in atmosphere, all the seriousness of their discussion fading away. Evan looks a little confused, but starts laughing along with her, even if he doesn’t really understand.

As their laughter dies down, Aldira pipes up, “Shall we go re-join the others, then?”

“Yes,” Evan responds, before he suddenly gets an idea, based on something Aldira said the day before.

“How about,” he says, a wide smile coming up on his figure, “as proof of our new allyship, I let you hitch a ride?” With his thumb, he points at Ollie over his shoulder.

Aldira responds in kind, smiling fondly at the memory from just yesterday, which then quickly turns into a wry smile at the actual prospect of flying again.

“I’d love to, but, uh,” she stammers, as she remembers her experience from the day before, “the last time didn’t go too well for me – considering the whole, y’know, almost falling to my death thing.”

“I thought life was too short to be held back by dumb thoughts?” he counters.

“Well, that *is* true,” she concedes.

“Right? Just hold onto me tight, and it’ll be fine!”

“...yeah, okay, sure,” she mumbles. “Let’s do that.”

With that said, the two climb onto the griffin’s back and, mirroring the gesture from when Evan healed her earlier, they fly off to join back with the rest of the group.

Bonus: The Blue Ring

After catching Aldira up on the situation, the three who exited the scene, leaving Gilahad to teach Evan the basics of sun magic in the clearing where Aldira had first met him, quickly found out that there wasn't actually anything to keep them occupied in the meantime, so they all split up to do their own thing: Darashan and Evelyn decided to attempt some joint training, to better familiarise themselves with each other, while Aldira scoured the area for the comfiest patch of grass and sat down to relax – and, after inevitably getting bored – also began using her own magic to create tiny leprechauns and make them fight.

To an inexperienced viewer, this action may seem like a flippant abuse of the sacred art of the primas, for naught but her own entertainment, however, to a discerning eye, the skill that went into this activity would not go unnoticed – a master illusionist would immediately realise that incredible form was required for this high-level exercise, reserved purely for those at the peak of the craft.

That authority on the topic would, in this case, be dead wrong – she was, most decidedly, only fooling around.

“What is this?” Evelyn suddenly asks, causing Aldira to jump, startled, as she had been so engrossed in the play-fight that she hadn't noticed the approach of her comrade.

“...training,” she unconvincingly lies, as she scrambles to remove the evidence of her malpractice. With a few delicate movements of her skilled hands, the poor leprechauns are taken away from the world that they had so shortly been a part of.

In her rush to cover up, however, Aldira momentarily forgets to hide something, shining beautifully on one of her fingers – a ring coloured like the vast, clear sea, beautifully adorned with the mark of a certain flower, a crest which Evelyn vaguely recalls, but is unable to place. After realising it's been seen, Aldira makes to shield it from sight, but alas, it is already too late – and, unfortunately, the attempted concealment has only served to further pique the interest of the curious onlooker.

“So,” she starts, “Who's the lucky one?” Shortly after Evelyn asks this, she adds, “Not Uncle, I hope.”

Realising that avoiding the topic is already a fruitless endeavour, Aldira reluctantly decides to play along.

“Actually, while you weren't looking, Gilly and I have really begun to bond. Many a nightly enterprise has left us hopelessly in love!” she exclaims, feigning the dreamy, tender and overwrought way a travelling bard would bring a passionate tale of affection between star-crossed lovers.

In response to this, Evelyn simply stares at Aldira, until she inevitably cracks under the pressure, grabbing her own neck as if she were gagging.

“Sorry, I can't – even joking about it is leaving a bad taste in my mouth!” she lets escape.

In response, Evelyn smiles heartily as she sits down on the grass, next to her friend and ally.

“I don't exactly know you as the type to wear jewellery,” she remarks.

“That’s because I’m not,” Aldira confirms, before sighing. “My hand was forced.”

“How so?” Evelyn asks, a question carrying a tone that indicates genuine interest, asserting no intent to merely tease – a tone she’s used many a times in the past, to the point that Aldira has had no choice left but to reluctantly accept that intention as true, despite the distinct lack of people that had ever shown such an interest in her before. Namely, the only two to ever do so were Darashan and the woman beside her now.

As such, with a sigh, she begrudgingly decides to tell the story.

“Remember yesterday, when we were returning to the inn and you guys all came together for a discussion, leaving me out and alone, to fend for myself against the unfamiliar human?”

“...yes,” Evelyn answers, ignoring the apparent smidgen of contempt that hung in the air after those words.

“Well, at the time, we happened to run into someone...”

We were just walking along the road, talking, when a topic we’d momentarily come upon earlier, but were forced to drop, came up. The reason we had passed on this subject was as a result of time constraints, forced on us by the fact that I was standing, without footholds, on top of a flying griffin. Yes, it was about him, for some reason, not having any money.

“And why, exactly, did you choose not to take a reward?” I asked him. “Anyone with half a brain could see the woman was loaded!”

“I didn’t do it to be compensated,” he responded.

At this point, I was pretty annoyed – you know how much I do appreciate a fair bit of moolah – so I ended up lashing out at him a bit.

“Doesn’t mean you can’t take it anyway,” I expressed in frustration.

“It’s not like I needed money.”

“You didn’t—” I started, before interrupting myself to exclaim, “You’re *literally* penniless!”

Evan seemed to ponder this for a moment, before answering with a soft smile.

“It’s not like I need money.”

This response was oddly sobering, allowing me to calm my overexcited self a little.

“I mean, I guess you don’t *need* need it, no, but there’s no real downside to having it either.”

“But what if someone jumped up on my griffin, trying to rob me?”

Initially, I let out a small laugh at this statement, before realising from his expression that, despite what one would think, it wasn’t a joke, nor was it a jab at me, who he, at first, had thought was doing exactly that. No, apparently, this was not the case – he was, in all seriousness, pondering the possibility.

“Fair enough,” I conceded, so utterly baffled by the response that I lost the will to argue any further. This was, however, great timing for the discussion to end, as we were suddenly addressed by a familiar-sounding shout moments later.

“Ah, there you are!” the voice of the mother of the previously injured child boomed. The woman ran up to the two of us, although she was obviously only there to talk to our human friend.

“I’ve been looking all over for you!” she almost yelled at him, apparently very excited to see him again. “You up and disappeared the moment I looked away!”

At this point, I noticed that, for some reason, he seemed a bit uncomfortable at the situation. I think he might’ve left before accepting any kind of monetary reward earlier that day, only so he wouldn’t become the centre of attention, dodging any possible commotion. It’s just a presumption, though, so don’t dig too deeply into it.

Moving on, the woman continued, “I still haven’t been able to properly thank you for your help!”

“That’s okay,” he said, humbling himself, “anyone would’ve done the same.”

I wanted to butt in to mention that, in a whole crowd of people, not a single person did the same, but I thought it better not to interject.

“Even then, I’d like to at least repay you.”

The moment these words came out of her mouth, I knew we’d hit bank – you remember how fancy that carriage looked, right? – but I also realised that the dumbass who earned the potential repayment most likely wouldn’t take it, so I started brainstorming a way to force it on him – for his own sake, of course.

Predictably, he responded, “That’s fine, I don’t need anything like that. I’m perfectly happy just knowing your son is safe and sound.”

“Now, now,” I intruded, seeing my moment. “I’m sure that, if someone helped *you* in such a situation, you’d want to do something in return as well, right?”

“I suppose?” he responded, in an unsure manner, as if he’d never thought about such a situation.

“Wouldn’t you also insist if they refused to let you recoup them?”

“Yes, yes.” The woman nodded along, agreeing with my assessment. Meanwhile, the stubborn child still didn’t seem entirely convinced.

“It simply makes no sense to not let people return your favours.” Having said this, it seems he’d almost been persuaded. I decided to let the woman deliver the finishing blow herself.

“Yes, exactly,” she said. “I’d feel bad if I couldn’t pay you back somehow. You saved my son’s life after all!”

I really thought that would do it, but, still, he stubbornly refused, despite my expectations.

“I don’t know. I don’t particularly want any money.”

It was only at this point that I realised his reluctance was *specifically* about taking a monetary reward, which I don’t think I’d ever be able to help him out of, meaning there was nothing left for me – I mean, us – to gain. Therefore, naturally, I stopped trying to assist him.

“There has to be something I can...” the woman muttered, before her gaze wandered to her hand, causing her eyes to widen, as she shouted, “That’s it!”

Without any hesitation, she removed the ring she was wearing from her finger, and pushed it towards him.

“Please, at least take this as a token of my appreciation.” For a moment, it seemed he’d refuse, still, but, seeing the look in her eyes, which was sad, almost desperate to somehow return what she most likely considered her life’s favour, – it felt like, to her, her son’s was more important than her own, after all – made him reconsider.

“Then, I’ll gladly take it,” he said, as he extended his arm forward slightly, showing his palm, which allows the woman to put the ring in his open hand and then push it close, tightly grasping his fist with both her hands.

“Thank you very much,” she said, gratefully. For a second, the air felt magical, like something had transpired that transcended the bounds of the simple things that bind us, allowing the woman to sincerely express gratitude towards a mere human.

For a moment, I thought the woman was about to break into tears, but the magic dispersed as quickly as it had come, and the woman shook his hand one last time, before thanking him again, and excusing herself to return to her business. Once we’d seen her off, he opened his hand and simply stared at the ornament.

“Ah, so that’s why I recognised the crest on that thing!” Evelyn exclaims, as the thing that had been on the tip of her tongue suddenly came to her. “It was also on the carriage we saw yesterday.”

“Yes,” Aldira responds, “it’s the Lopia flower, the mark of the Lopobia family. Their main house is a lot further to the east, so it makes sense you wouldn’t recognise it.”

Evelyn simply nods, acknowledging this fact, as she’s never gotten herself involved with central Elbian politics. Suddenly, she realises something off about the story.

“Wait, but, if the woman gave the ring to Evan, why do you have it?”

Aldira sighs.

“I’d hoped you wouldn’t think about that,” she responds. She had thought that, maybe, possibly, she could use Evelyn’s self-distraction to end the story ahead of time.

“Sorry,” Evelyn apologises, although she really isn’t sorry at all. Following another sigh, Aldira continues the tale where it left off.

While our human friend was spacing out, staring at the prize he’d gotten his hands on, I, too, properly spied what he was holding. My first impression was, obviously, that the thing must be worth a metric fuckton, considering it’s a real-life artefact of the Lopobia family. So much so, that I momentarily weighed snatching it up and running far away to live the rest of my life in luxury.

I didn’t, of course, but it seems I was caught fantasizing by its new owner.

“Would you like to have it?” he offered.

Now, at the time, I had no idea why one would ever say such a thing, but I wasn't about to decline a sweet proposal of such a calibre. However, as I was reaching out for it, my conscience had to strike out, creating one final barrier for me.

"No, no, no, I couldn't," I answered, cursing innerly at myself for wasting this golden opportunity. "It's yours, you should keep it."

However, he insisted, through an excuse, as he pointed to the gloves he's always wearing.

"No, you see, these things make it so I can't carry it along. I have to wear them, since my hands get cold very easily, but there's no space under them for something like a ring to be worn."

"Is that so?" I responded. It was more or less obvious that this wasn't the truth he was telling, but he clearly had some kind of reason for not wanting to take it with him – a reason that, I remind you, I don't think I could ever wrap my head around, no matter what.

"Yes," he simply said, while presenting the ring to me. So, with a heavy heart and not a single primal desire, I decided to take this burden off him.

"Alright, don't mind if I do, then," I said, as I took it off his hands and pocketed it. This action, however, had me caught in an extraordinarily unusual stare, like a passers-by at a robber on the run, who stopped dead in his tracks to give a random child a cookie, causing him to get caught.

"You're not wearing it?" he asked.

"I wasn't planning to, no," I responded. For some reason, I didn't feel like lying or making up an excuse, so I just told him that, in all honesty.

But, by the gods, if you could've seen his expression when I said it. Those damn eyes, man, I felt like I'd just kicked a puppy into a fire!

"That's a shame," he responded, still with those same downcast eyes, as if I'd just told him I'd much prefer him as a dead body, but he was too polite to lash out at me in return. "I thought it would look very pretty on you."

Looking at him, and hearing what he was saying, I was offered a choice: feel guilty for the rest of my life or wear the damned thing.

So, as such, I relented.

"Alright, fine, I'll wear it for now," I said, with a sigh.

Suddenly his face lit up like I'd just offered him a million gold coins – or, like, promised to bring him to the comfiest bed in the world, I guess? I don't really know an appropriate comparison, but you get the point. In any case, it wasn't hard to imagine a wagging tail on him, as I pulled the ring back out and slipped it onto my finger.

"Hm, it's just as I thought," he said, with a self-satisfied smile plastered on his face.

"You didn't try to take it off later, saying it just wasn't for you?" Evelyn remarks, putting herself in her friend's mind-state.

"I did!" Aldira responded. "Of course I did! But, when he saw it this morning, he just had that melancholic, downtrodden look on his face again, leaving me no choice, *again*." As her younger ally, who she'd always considered a little like a younger sister, let out her frustration, Evelyn couldn't help but break into a giggle at the silly situation.

"What're you laughing at." Aldira says with a spiteful glare.

"Sorry, it's nothing," she responds. "Although, it is a bit strange for you, who prides herself on flirting with all kinds of people, to fall for flattery like this."

"Oh no, this is completely different." Aldira responds to the mild teasing by wildly shaking her arms, crossing them into a big X. "They're nothing alike."

"How so?"

"Well, flirting is fun because it's like a battle of words – you're both trying to inconspicuously compliment each other in completely normal terms, which can be easily interpreted in an entirely different, more innocent way. With an oblivious kid like that, however, any such subtleties go right over his head, and then he returns the favour by letting out flattery that would make any man go completely red with embarrassment, yet does it with a completely straight face, like compliment someone in that way were the most normal thing in the world to do. I can't take it."

"Hm, hm," Evelyn says, having nodded along the whole time she spoke. "So what you're saying is, you're very weak to those types?"

At this point, it's clear the conversation has completely derailed, leaving the two stranded in Tease-town, as Aldira once again glares at her.

"Don't even joke about it. He's a human, nothing more."

"Right, sorry, that was too much," Evelyn insincerely apologises, but Aldira nonetheless accepts it, letting it go. "I'll get out of your hair."

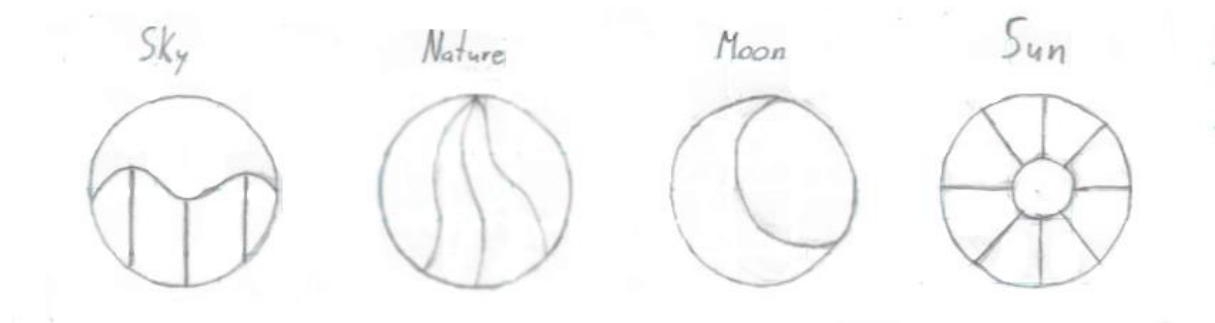
Aldira acknowledges this with no more than a simple *Hm*, as Evelyn gets up and goes to re-join Darashan in their training session. Aldira waves her off, before lying down in the grass, holding her hand out above her to block out the sun, which was just peeking out from behind a cloud, as if it were coming to bother her about the whole thing as well.

Staring at the beringed finger, where the ornament brightly reflected the few rays that the sun was allowing down, she heaved another sigh.

"What are you doing, Rayna?" she muttered to herself, repeating something her grandmother always used to say. "What are you doing?"

Extras:

Prima symbols:



Top character's thoughts on/feelings around:

	Evan	Aldira	Gilahad	Evelyn	Darashan
Evan	X	Mixed	Very naïve, needs discipline	Feels sorry for lying	New friend for Aldira
Aldira	Way too cool	X	Idiot	Would like to get closer to her	Like a daughter
Gilahad	Knowledgeable	Dumbass	X	Respected(?) uncle	Old ally with the same goal
Evelyn	Still a little mad at her	A little like an older sister	Beloved niece	X	Motherly, good influence on Aldira
Darashan	Steed????	Like a dad	Great respect	Too large	X

Part 2: Initiation

Chapter 1

After convincing him to return, Aldira and Evan return to the rest of the group to be welcomed with open arms. Aldira informs them of the agreement they'd settled on, and everyone okays the arrangement without any objections, aside from Gilahad, who asserts that there do have to be limits when it comes to offering assistance, if everyone concurs it's outside the realm of possibility, which Evan agrees to. While they're still talking about this, the driver returns to the scene of the crime to find his wagon miraculously unharmed, and Gilahad quickly offers to escort him the rest of the way to town, which the man agrees to without a second thought.

As the city of Lindal begins to loom up in the distance, Aldira somehow ends up regaling the story of how she and Darashan climbed Mt. Collisca, the tallest mountain in southwestern Elbe – a story Gilahad has already had the joy of being told a million times over, prompting him to instead join the escorted for some casual conversation.

"So you make your living as a merchant, right?" he asks the man.

"That's right," the man answers, "ever since I was a sprightly young lad. Quite successfully, too, if I may so humbly add."

"What is it you trade in then, so lucratively?"

"Well," the man proudly starts, puffing out his chest, "I used my connections to gain clout with the Weaver's Association, and now bring their wares around – discreetly, of course."

"Peddling Anti, huh? That'll most definitely bring in the coins, I suppose."

"In these trying times, the stuff is in extra high demand – the weavers can't keep up with the rate the stuff is being bought at all! – so I'm getting swarmed with work. Which, in my case, is far from a bad thing!" he jokes, and Gilahad laughs weakly along, to keep the jolly merchant appeased.

"With all the Thunderites roaming around, it's sensible to want anti-magic to restrain them, I suppose," Gilahad surmises. "Is that what those goons were pestering you for as well?"

"Pft," the man scoffs, "those fools had no idea I had it!"

"No?" Gilahad questions. "Did they not check inside?"

"Of course they did!" the man exclaims in response, before showing the smile of a man who believes himself the shrewdest of all. "But I outsmarted the nitwits! I camouflaged the goods with normal clothing, and they fell for it hook, line and sinker! Well, 'tis expected from one of my schemes, I suppose!"

Gilahad does his best impression of an impressed look, which somehow convinces the self-proclaimed genius.

"A very prudent decision," he diplomatically flatters.

"Of course, of course!" the man boasts. "Yes, the scraps they demanded were mere droplets in the ocean compared to what's in this baby!" he continues, pointing to the wagon.

"I see, I see," Gilahad says, nodding along with the man's ramblings. "But, if I may ask, why would you not simply pay up if it were such a meagre sum to you?"

At this, the merchant looks greatly offended.

"You think me the type to simply bow down at any threat? The gall!"

"I do so apologise," Gilahad offers, satisfying the brusque man's grievance, who does make sure to scoff before continuing to speak.

"You are forgiven," he says. "In the first place, however, the wares don't necessarily belong to me. I simply transport it."

Gilahad wants to yell, *'Why didn't you say so in the first place, then!?' at him, but holds himself back, maintaining the polite business smile he prides himself in.*

"It seems you truly have a strong business running," he replies, instead.

"Yes, that's right," the man affirms, patting himself on the back. "And, what about you all? You don't seem like simple travellers with a penchant for battle to me."

"I am a former knight of castle Candlan, accompanied by, among others, two more who served there, if that answers your question," Gilahad says.

"Ah," the merchant replies, with a look as if everything makes sense to him now. "I suppose that would leave you with enough of a grudge to engage a whole group of Thunderites so recklessly."

"Yes, that's right," Gilahad answers, hiding his annoyance at the man's critique of their actions, despite the fact that it led to saving him.

The man then looks at Gilahad's hair, noting the long ponytail, consisting of several connected sections. It seems like he would slap his palm to his own forehead, were it not for the fact that he had both hands occupied.

"Oh, how could I have been so blind," he theatrically exclaims, "as to not notice I was in the presence of an esteemed knight! And," he continues, stopping only a moment to affirm the length of Gilahad's ponytail, reaching almost to his hips, "quite a remarkable one at that!"

"I thank you for the kind words," Gilahad, reluctantly, answers, pretend-humbly accepting the praise.

"In truth, I, too, harbour some enmity towards Thunder," the self-important man then pipes up, returning the topic of conversation back to himself. "I used to operate mostly in the west, you see. After Thunder gained control of castle Candlan, however, it slowly became too precarious to carry on, so I took to the east to continue my work instead."

"Have you ever directly opposed him?" Gilahad questions, seeing the opportunity to ask about the one subject that had interested him enough to start the exchange he's now stranded in – he's still curious as to the exact reason why this person was targeted.

"Me? God, no!" the man decisively exclaims. "I'm but a simple merchant, do you really believe I'd stand up to a violent dictator like Thunder?"

“No? Nothing comes to mind, at all, that may have offended Thunder?”

The man now contemplates the question properly, racking his brain to find any such thing.

“I suppose I have made some contributions to the Church of the Saviour,” he comes up with. “That may have set him off.”

“That could quite well be it, yes,” Gilahad says, satisfied with the answer, as something like donating to the church would be adequate reason to put someone on a list of targets, like what the leader of the Thunderites they’d battled had had.

“It seems we’re almost in town,” the merchant then comments.

“Yes, that’s right,” Gilahad affirms.

“Then,” the merchant starts, allowing his eyes to glide over his conversational partner, “I’d like to talk business for a moment.”

“...what business?” Gilahad answers, immediately intrigued at the prospect – the finances of the group have been lacking lately, after all.

The merchant laughs.

“It’s good to see you finally wear your emotions on your face, former knight of Candlan!”

“I’m pleased you’re pleased,” Gilahad responds, quickly retaking refuge behind his business smile, which he’d – ironically – dropped at the first mention of actual business.

The merchant laughs again, before also transitioning to a serious face.

“The Weaver’s Association has need for people with the talents of you and your allies, knight. I have the connections to set you up for a couple gigs, if you’d like.”

“What kind of jobs are we talking about, exactly?” Gilahad narrows his eyes, as they arrive at the gates of Lindal, where a group of elves are standing around in a not inconspicuous manner. Suddenly, they walk up to Gilahad and the merchant, before Gilahad’s question can be answered.

“I’m very glad to see you’ve arrived, sir,” one of the elves says to the merchant. “I was starting to worry something had overcome you.”

“Some trouble held me up,” he replies. “Fortunately, this man and his allies were there to assist me.”

The apparent subordinate of the merchant now turns to Gilahad, quickly looking him over, before giving him a bow as thanks. Afterwards, she returns her attention to the merchant, goading him to leave his seat on the cart with a simple gesture, which he quickly does. The woman, together with the other two elves, takes his place, although not quite in the exact way – while the merchant had been sitting down, pushing the cart along using Sun magic, the woman retracts the seat he’d been using and pushes it manually instead.

“One, two,” she shouts, before the three bolt off, with the wagon behind them.

While Gilahad is still staring dumbfoundedly at their retreating figures, the merchant speaks up, pulling his attention back.

“If you’re interested,” he says, “come to the merchant’s guild first thing tomorrow, and we’ll talk more. Capisce?”

“Ah, yes! Understood,” Gilahad answers, more hurriedly than he’d like, as he returns to his senses.

The merchant nods satisfiedly, curtly saying, “Good.”

As he walks off, nonchalantly passing by the guardsmen, Gilahad is left feeling like he’d somehow lost, finding himself with a respect for the businessman, despite his dislike for the person. With a wry sigh, he turns around and loudly claps his hands.

“Team, gather up and we’ll decide on our next course of action!”

As the sun begins to show itself, Gilahad finds himself in front of a relatively large structure, which is, considering the time of day, far more busy than would be expected, with people entering and leaving as if there were nothing odd about already being done with your business at dawn.

Feeling slightly outdone – he likes to consider himself someone who works early without any difficulty – Gilahad walks inside and surveys the area. The place gives off the feeling of a pub, almost, littered with tables and patrons busily chatting – there’s even a bar to order drinks, it seems.

The big difference, however, is in the contents of these *chats*; every moment is a deal made, apparently, from what Gilahad can gather as he passes by a few tables.

Finally, he finds the person he’s looking for, sat unnoticeably in a far-off corner, speaking with someone who seems to be another business partner. Sheepishly, Gilahad approaches the duo.

“Hello?” he asks, calling the attention of the two, who, upon further inspection, actually are simply chatting about nothing.

“Ah, there you are! We’ve been waiting,” the merchant jovially exclaims, as he gets up to greet him, although not without a quick remark to further Gilahad’s defeatist feelings about his morningness.

“Sorry for the delay,” he responds, forced to admit his own inadequacy, as he innerly pledges to be an hour early from now on.

He then takes a quick glance over to the other person, professionally smiling, just like everyone else in the building, it seems. Noticing this look, the merchant decides introductions are in order.

“This here,” he starts, gesturing towards the unknown member of their gathering, “is Luan Jinji, a spokesperson of – and my business partner from – the Weaver’s Association.”

He now faces Luan instead, shifting the role of introductee.

“And this is,” he starts, casually leaving a pause until Gilahad introduces himself, as the merchant hasn’t actually learned the name.

“Gilahad Gremor,” he fills in, realising what the merchant is so unabashedly going for, as if it isn’t the least bit strange not to know the name of the person you’re introducing, “former knight of Candlan. I now roam Elbe for personal reasons.”

“A former knight of Candlan, you say?” Luan repeats, politely impressed, soliciting a quick acknowledgment from the merchant, before he continues on to what interested him more in Gilahad’s introduction.

“May I ask what these personal reasons are?” he asks, faux-oblivious to the reason why Gilahad left the details out.

Gilahad looks wryly back at him, considering his words; he’s still undecided about whether he wants to make Evan’s existence too public, as it may solicit unwanted attention. He’d prefer to at least have the boy battle-ready before they start to attract trouble – especially since Aldira’s proclamation to the goons of Thunder has given them a de facto time limit, as Thunder himself should act out against them once word reaches him. As such, they need all the time they can get, with the fewest interruptions possible.

While Gilahad is weighing these factors, the merchant shows an impish smile, as speaks for the knight, in a loud whisper, as if announcing a public secret.

“He and his are getting revenge on Thunder,” he reveals.

Gilahad shoots a displeased look towards the merchant, who smiles back as if he’s done not a thing wrong. Although it’s unclear whether or not he truly thinks this, one thing becomes very clear, as Luan’s face lights up.

“So that’s why you wanted me to meet him, huh?” the spokesperson exclaims, facing his associate, who meets his gaze with a jolly nod, while Gilahad is left even further out of the loop.

“I’m sorry, could I asked to be briefed on this?” the confused knight asks.

“You see,” Luan begins to clarify, “the Association has been increasingly busy securing trade routes away from Thunder’s sphere of influence – especially in the east. As such, we’ve sent more and more personnel out for that purpose, leaving us short on hands.”

“And that’s why you need us?” Gilahad enquires, not quite seeing yet why they’d been so excited at the news of his own goals.

“Not exactly,” Luan continues, before taking a quick look around to check if no one happened to be listening in. Despite finding this to be the case, he nonetheless switches to a whisper, closing the distance between their faces.

“Actually, we called in a deal with the Church of the Saviour to receive an oracle from them, to help us more efficiently organise our troops. This has gone very well so far.”

Luan now grimaces.

“However, at the moment, Thunder is more and more relentlessly pressuring this area – as you may have noticed – so we’d like to stealthily move him away from here, to a more remote area.”

“But,” Gilahad pipes up, “since you’re short on hands, you don’t have anyone who could be an escort?”

“Bingo,” Luan responds, pointing a finger at him.

“I was aware of this dilemma,” the merchant speaks up, “so when I ran into you all yesterday, I thought, ‘who better for the job than a small group of elite soldiers with a vendetta against Thunder?’”

He nods in a self-satisfied manner.

“I’m glad we’re all on the same page in regard to that,” he remarks.

“So,” Luan continues, after a quick word of agreement towards his associate, “what do you think? Are you in?”

Gilahad considers the option. A low-key job that would keep them all on the move – hopefully away from Thunder’s attention – giving them time to teach Evan while taking care of their money problems and even giving them some clout with the Weaver’s Association seems almost too good to be true.

And yet, surrounded by savvy businessmen, who know exactly how to use the pieces on their chessboard, he feels oddly inclined towards believing in the odds.

For that reason, he puts on a cheeky smile and responds:

“Depends on how much you pay.”

Chapter 2

After finishing negotiations, Gilahad thanks Luan and the merchant for their business, before heading back to the inn to announce the proceedings. Going inside, however, he finds that everyone has yet to gather, despite the fact that he’s been out for a while already.

“Where’s Aldira?” he enquires, prompting all the rest to show a wry grimace, except for Evan, who answers without a second’s wait.

“She went to take a nap, since you weren’t around,” he says.

“A—A nap? It’s still morning!” he yells, before being shushed by another patron.

“You should really watch your volume, Gilly,” Darashan remarks, impersonating the missing member the best he can, in a loud whisper. “It’s still morning!”

Gilahad resignedly sighs.

“Can someone go get her? I’d like to elaborate on yesterday’s discussion.”

“I’ll go!” Evan immediately exclaims, before passing by a confused Gilahad to go out the door.

“...she’s napping outside?” the former knight asks, as Evan gets out of earshot.

“Where else would one nap?” Darashan responds, deadpan, as if Gilahad’s the weird one for suggesting anything else.

With a bitter frown, Gilahad turns to his niece.

“You’re with me on this, right, Evelyn?” he appeals, in a last-ditch effort to confirm he isn’t the crazy one.

“No comment.”

He can only sigh again.

“Aldiraaaaa?” Evan shouts into the air, where he was told to come looking if the party had to gather. “Are you there?”

“Hm,” a mumble comes from an unclear direction, “I’m over here.”

Evan follows the sound to find the object of his search laid on a particularly thick branch of a nearby tree, relaxing with perfect balance. He blankly stares at her for a moment, in mild bewilderment, before remembering the reason he came in the first place.

“Gilahad’s calling for you,” he announces, which is quickly met with an annoyed frown from Aldira.

“Already?” she says, grieving over the loss of her momentary free time. “I only just found a good spot!”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologise,” she says, in response to Evan’s genuine remorse. “I’m just fucking about, don’t worry. Let me grab my things and I’ll be right with you.”

Evan acknowledges this with a nod, as Aldira grabs her knives and pouch, which she’d strewn over a few spots she’d determined as safe.

While Evan’s still staring up in mild wonder at her dexterity and balance, a thought suddenly strikes her.

“Hey Ev,” she calls out, with the smile of someone about to make an incredibly corny pun – which she is.

“Would you say you really *look up* to me right now?”

“Yes, I do!” the boy immediately responds, as excited as a dog who was just shown a stick. “Just looking at how you go about your day to day life is already fascinating!”

“Uh, right,” she sheepishly offers, more surprised that she wasn’t expecting such a response than she is about the response itself. “But it was more a joke about the fact that you’re looking up at me.”

Evan takes a moment to let this sink.

“Ah, I get it,” he exclaims, as he lets a subdued giggle escape his lips. “Very funny!”

“...right,” she mutters, before also breaking out in a laugh she can’t quite manage to suppress. Meanwhile, Evan’s giggle quickly becomes hearty as well, being pulled along by silly mood.

Once the two idiots calm down, the one in the tree catching her bearings long enough to finish up and jump down, they merrily start to make their way to the others.

While they silently walk, however, Evan constantly fidgets, glancing over to his companion, but looking away whenever his gaze is caught.

Although she finds it a little funny at first, Aldira eventually gets sick of his hesitation and decides that, following earlier patterns, the boy is most likely trying to ask some silly question and is waiting for the right words. As such, she pipes up.

“Is something the matter?” she asks, prompting Evan to jump in a classic him-fashion.

“Ah, well, I was just wondering,” he rattles off, before taking a deep breath to properly start.

“Your joke earlier made me curious as to whether *you* look up to anyone in particular?”

“Me?” she responds. “Well, I suppose I do.”

Evan’s eyes sparkle.

“Who?” he goes on, thrilled to hear more. “They must be really amazing if you look up to them!”

Aldira smiles wryly, seemingly torn for a second, before making a decision.

“Can you promise not to speak a word of this to anyone else?” she asks, suddenly getting more serious than expected. Evan, catching this mood, nods severely. After one last look around, to make sure no one is listening in on their everyday conversation, she hushedly speaks up.

“To be perfectly honest,” she admits, “I kind of look up to everyone in the party.”

“Really?” Evan responds, taking by surprise at this answer.

“Yeah,” she nods. “I mean, obviously, they all have their own faults and flaws, but no elf is perfect – except me, of course,” she jokes, although Evan earnestly nods along.

Shrugging it off, she continues:

“But, for every blemish, they excel at something else, and I look up to them for exactly those strengths.”

Noticing Evan not entirely following, she decides to elaborate.

“Take Gilly for example,” she offers. “He often comes off as an angry old man and – don’t get me wrong – he kind of *is*, but it’s because he’s passionate and committed. He always keeps his eyes on the end-goal and knows what needs to be done to get there, which is why he acts as our commander in battle. He gets heated when people get out of line, because he wants to prevent anything that may detract from reaching the goal.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Evan responds, and Aldira nods in acknowledgement.

“Also, he’s really easy to make fun of,” she continues. “He’s still an idiot, after all.”

“...that’s a good thing?” Evan wonders.

“That’s a good thing,” Aldira confirms.

“Hm,” Evan grunts in response, considering everything Aldira’s said so far, before going on.

“What about the other two?”

“Well,” Aldira continues, “although Lyn is a bit too good at making conversation go her way, which makes her come off as manipulative at times, she really does genuinely care about people.”

She fondly smiles.

“Whenever I talk to her, she shows this honest interest, listening to what I have to say, and it gives me this fuzzy feeling inside. It *does* make me end up saying more than I want to, unfortunately.”

“I...can’t say I feel the same,” Evan bitterly responds; after all, the very first time they met, she lied to him – something he’s still a bit disgruntled about.

“Just give her some time and you’ll warm up to her,” Aldira assures. “Trust me.”

“...alright,” Evan responds, with a soft, but reluctant smile. “If you say so, I will.”

“Good,” she nods, before returning from the minor tangent.

“And, lastly,” she says, “I look up to Dardar for obvious reasons.”

Evan stares perplexedly at her.

“His muscles?” he guesses.

“No, silly,” Aldira exclaims in response. “It’s because he’s hilarious!”

“...really?”

“Hell yeah!” she continues, with a wide smile. “He looks so serious – taciturn and aloof – but then he’s actually constantly dicking around. Isn’t it gut-bustingly comical?”

“I guess?” Evan sceptically affirms.

“Yep, he is,” Aldira declares, finishing her commentary.

While Evan starts to digest the whole thing, Aldira frolics about, moving almost dancingly as she continues on with a spring in her step.

“That, and the muscle thing,” she tacks on after a few moments, as their destination comes into sight, leaving a still bewildered Evan behind, as they re-join everyone.

“So,” Gilahad starts up, “now that everyone’s *actually here*,” he bites, while glaring at Aldira, who smiles innocently and waves at him, “we can get onto the details of what we discussed yesterday.”

“Discussed?” Aldira interjects. “I only remember you announcing we ran out of money, and we’d be doing some work here, while taking turns teaching. I don’t recall any discussion.”

“Maybe if you had any good suggestions, we could’ve discussed those?” he quips back.

“Hey, the travelling circus was a completely serious idea!” she mock-offendedly throws at Gilahad, who simply sighs in resignation.

“*Moving on*,” he snarls, “I’ve found us a perfect job as—”

“A travelling circus?”

“*an escort*,” he continues, unbothered by Aldira’s interruption, “for an important character to the Weaver’s Association. The goal is to deliver him, unharmed, to the town of Bellonas, which is about a five moon’s travel from here.”

“Don’t we want something more low-profile?” Evelyn weighs in. “Being the escort of an important individual seems like it would attract a lot of unwanted attention.”

“That’s right,” Gilahad responds, almost visibly happy someone brought it up, “which is exactly why this is the perfect job for us, as our escortee is being kept a secret from everyone, except key personnel and high-level members.”

“I see,” Evelyn answers, nodding as she considers a few other facets of the job, which all align well with their goals. “That *does* sound quite optimal.”

“Yes,” Gilahad proudly affirms.

“But how do you plan to teach Evan in the meantime?” Evelyn asks, finding another issue with the plan.

Gilahad now looks slightly downcast.

“That’s the one large drawback I also found with this plan and – to be perfectly honest – I don’t have a great solution for it. We can’t exactly use the handcart or wagon that will occupy the escortee for two of our own members, after all.”

While the discussing duo goes deep into thought, another member of the squad finds this to be their moment to shine.

“So, what I’m hearing here,” she says, “is that the travelling circus is back on the menu.”

Gilahad simply gives her a momentary angry look, before returning to what he was doing.

While he’s still struggling to find ideas, however, someone else unexpectedly makes a suggestion.

“Can’t we have me stay behind with someone else, and then catch up on Ollie while you guys rest?”

Everyone looks open-mouthed at Evan.

“That,” Gilahad pipes up, pointing a finger at the boy, “is a marvellous idea.”

“It is?”

“Yes,” Gilahad mutters, as he starts to consider the specifics, which only gets him progressively more excited. “it absolutely is. Well done,” he compliments.

“Thank you!” Evan happily beams.

“Yes, we’ll go with that,” Gilahad announces, taking back the lead in the discussion. “If everyone agrees.”

“sfine with me,” Aldira answers, and Darashan nods.

“In what order will we go?” the last person wonders.

“I’d like to suggest Aldira go first,” Gilahad responds.

"Me?" a taken-aback Aldira exclaims. "Why?"

"Well," Gilahad explains, "I'd like to ensure a proper, working relationship with our client, and a good first impression is a large part of that."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"I'm glad you asked," he continues. "You see, there's no way you can mess it up, if you aren't even there in the first place."

Aldira stares indignantly at Gilahad, after this proclamation.

"Name one time I've done that."

Gilahad opens his mouth to speak, but is interrupted before he can get a word out.

"That one doesn't count; name another time," Aldira says.

Gilahad once again opens his mouth to speak, and is once again interrupted before he can say anything.

"That one doesn't count either; name another time."

Gilahad looks at her for a second, a completely blank expression.

"Would you be fine with that, Evan?" he asks, putting on a smile as he turns away from the annoyance.

"Ah," the boy startledly answers, "it's fine with me."

"Then it's decided," the make-shift chairman says, nodding. "We depart in an hour, so make sure you're all ready!"

While Aldira is still pretending to frown angrily at Gilahad, the meeting is adjourned.

Chapter 3

On the outskirts of town, Gilahad is tapping his feet patiencelessly, as he, Evelyn and Darashan wait for the client.

"Calm down," Evelyn comments to their restless leader.

Gilahad looks to her, noticing the movements of his feet, and agrees.

"Yes, I should settle down. You're right," he sputters, almost rambling.

"Why don't you take a seat?" she suggests, noticing the distinct lack of calming down that followed this statement.

"It's only proper to be standing when meeting someone, no?"

"You're so archaic, old man," Darashan pipes up, once again pulling out his Aldira impression, to remind Gilahad of what would be said, were she to be here, leaving the other two momentarily stunned in surprise.

“What he means,” Evelyn picks up, a few seconds after, “is that there’s no need to be so stiff. It’ll be fine.”

“...yes, you’re right,” Gilahad responds, as he gives in and sits down.

The moment his behind touches the seat, however, Darashan gets up, his ears alert, which makes Gilahad jump back to his previous position.

“They’re here.” Darashan announces, as he looks in the direction they’re being approached from.

What they end up seeing is a fancy wagon, reminiscent of the one the merchant has, being pushed by two of the people that had been waiting for the merchant at the gates of the city, the day before.

And leading them is Luan, who gives the other a command to rest, as he comes forward to meet Gilahad and the rest.

“It’s quite impressive that you’ve been able to make arrangements so quickly,” Gilahad flatters the on-coming man, as the both of them put on their respective business smiles.

“Likewise; I would never have dreamt, last night, that our long-lasting issues would be handled so swiftly,” Luan responds, as they shake hands. “I do apologise for the delay, however.” A grimace momentarily crosses his expression. “We were...held up.”

“Please,” Gilahad assures, “It was no issue at all – we’d never be bothered by such a measly postponement.”

For a second, Luan’s face lights up, but the flicker is gone as fast as it came.

“Good, good,” he says, while Gilahad is still attempting to figure out what that face was for.

Luan then looks behind him, at the other two Gilahad has brought along. First, he inspects the taller, muscled man – who has to hold himself back from instinctively posing to show off, while he’s slowly scanned from top to bottom.

Seeming impressed, he goes on to look at Evelyn, who simply smiles kindly back at him.

“I was informed there would be five of you,” he comments, with a questioning look. “Was this not correct?”

“The other two are currently on stand-by,” Gilahad says, with a predetermined response to the expected query.

“You don’t expect to need your full force?” Luan sceptically continues his interrogation.

“I expect we will not have need of more than three active personnel while at rest – one for the wagon, and two to guard. Are we to run into trouble, we can call upon the other two at any given time.”

“Ah, you would call upon the griffin?” Luan realises, picking up on the fact that the creature is also missing.

“That is correct. As such, the two on stand-by can perform other tasks until their presence is required.”

“You think like a businessman – I like that,” Luan proclaims. “It seems we’ve really found the right person for the job.”

“I am undeserving of your praise,” Gilahad continues, humbling himself – a politeness which Luan acknowledges with a curt nod, before returning to the main business.

“You have been informed of the specifics this morning, so I believe my presence here is no longer required,” he goes on.

“Yes, everything is taken care of.”

“Wonderful,” Luan replies, “I’ll be on my way then.”

Suddenly a pained grimace comes on the man’s face, as he puts a hand on Gilahad’s shoulder, looking him straight in the eye.

“Good luck,” he then whispers, almost as a warning for an unexplained danger. Gilahad wants to ask, but Luan has already turned around to flee, beckoning the two that were pulling the wagon to follow him, as an utterly befuddled Gilahad is left behind.

While this is happening, outside town, Aldira and Evan are just about to start their lesson.

“So,” Aldira begins, “as you may be aware, I will be teaching you how to use the moon prima – specifically, I’ll be instructing you on the ins and outs of illusion magic.”

“Yes!” Evan excitedly exclaims.

Aldira points at him in what she hopes is a cool-looking pose, as she responds, “That’s the kind of passion I’m looking for!”

She considers the best way to begin her lecture.

“Then, first things first, let’s start with what illusions *are*, exactly,” she continues. “Do you have any idea?” she asks Evan.

“Um,” he thinks, “Aren’t they something you see, which doesn’t really exist?”

“Almost. Rather, that’s half of it.”

Aldira opens up her hand, palm upwards, pulling Evan’s line of sight down towards it. What shows up is a tiny, extravagantly dressed man, with an oddly detailed outfit.

“...who’s that?” Evan understandably asks.

“Oh, that’s a man called The Phantom – he’s something like my idol, so I’ve gotten used to making him,” she explains, which makes Evan tilt his head in confusion.

“If he’s your idol, then why didn’t you mention him earlier?” he enquires.

“That’s not important!” Aldira shouts, slightly embarrassedly, forcing the conversation away from the topic, while the miniature Phantom disappears from its non-existence. “What *is* important, is that there’s another subset of illusions that aren’t caught in this definition.”

Aldira now holds up a finger, once again pulling Evan’s attention to her hand. This time, her finger seems to deform into something else, as it changes colour and fur sprouts out of it. Where her fingernail used to be, it grows little eyes, ears and a cutesy mouth.

“A cat?” Evan wonders.

“That’s right – you can also use illusions to change the way something is perceived, rather than creating a fake.”

“Like cat fingers?”

Aldira nods.

“Like cat fingers.”

“I see!” Evan exclaims, as he takes a mental note. “Phantoms and cat fingers...I’ll make sure to remember!”

“...yes, make sure to do that,” Aldira sheepishly continues, hoping the wrong things don’t get put to mind as a result of her unique way of teaching.

“To be perfectly clear, this still isn’t completely comprehensive – there’s still more to what can be done with illusion, but it’s quite advanced, so we’ll get to that some other time.”

Evan’s eyes spark with curiosity, which immediately makes Aldira regret ever mentioning it.

“As in, it’s lesson number 101 of ‘100 steps to becoming a master illusionist,’” she further elaborates, in a failed attempt to lessen her student’s interest.

“Maybe I can understand anyway?”

Aldira stares blankly at him.

“To clarify, that means it’s not even in the book.”

“Oh,” he downtroddenly mutters, “so you won’t teach me?”

Seeing the dejected look upon Evan’s face, beggingly sad, Aldira sighs.

“Alright, fine, I’ll explain. But, afterwards, no more tangents!”

Evan soars in happiness, a wide smile covering his entire being, seemingly.

“Of course! Thank you very much!”

Aldira bites her lip, considering the best way to convey the lesson. Looking up, the sun shines annoyingly into her eyes – which she interprets as a sign from the heavens, telling her how to do what she wishes.

“Did you know that the moon doesn’t actually shine?” she speaks up.

“Huh?” Evan exclaims, in surprise – only half due to the unexpected change of topic, half due to the new information. “But you can clearly see it does?”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you?” Aldira responds. “In reality, you don’t always know exactly what you’re seeing; the light coming from the moon is being reflected from the sun, but you wouldn’t know that with just a look.”

“Is that why illusions are a part of the moon prima?”

“Yes, and, as the moon reflects the sun, so too do illusions reflect sight,” Aldira continues, before closing the distance between them, and whispering as if she were telling a secret.

“Or at least,” she says, “that’s what people *think*.”

“It’s not?”

“It’s not.”

“Then,” Evan curiously questions, in the same tone of voice as his teacher, “what is it, actually?”

“I said it earlier, didn’t I?” A wide grin forms on her profile, as she attempts to instil more wonder upon her student. “You change the way something is *perceived*.”

Gilahad approaches the wagon, the other two in tow, as a figure slowly emerges from within the confines of the vehicle.

“So, you three will be my escort, huh?” a high-pitched voice escapes from the one who shows himself: a young boy – maybe two thirds of the way to adulthood – dressed as if money were no issue at all.

“That’s right,” Gilahad politely responds, “we will be taking care of you for the coming days.”

“You don’t look very strong,” the boy rudely remarks. For a second, Gilahad’s smile cracks.

“I assure you,” he goes on to say, as he forces the crack away, “my skill is more than up to par.”

“Yeah, right,” the oracle sarcastically quips back, before turning his eyes to Darashan.

“See, *that’s* the kind of person I like to have as a guard – strong and clearly dependable,” he says, while Darashan stands at attention, in a clear attempt to impress the oracle. “It’s a good thing you have at least *one* competent member.”

“Well,” Gilahad says, “regardless of how strong you *think* we are, we’ll make sure to bring you to your destination unharmed.”

“You’d better,” the oracle finally remarks.

“We will.”

Gilahad turns to Darashan and beckons him over. “If you’d please pull the wagon?” he asks-commands.

“No,” the oracle calls out, interjecting.

Gilahad looks back at the oracle at this sudden denial, to find the boy’s eyes flaring up, as he seems to look through Gilahad – his eyes simultaneously focused on the knight, as well staring into nothingness. Then, the boy blinks, and is back to normal, just as suddenly as he’d gone into the trance-like state.

“You’re of the sun prima, no?” he asks.

“Yes,” confirms a slightly perplexed Gilahad, “that’s right.”

“Then you should pull it, no?”

“Well, my companion here just so happens to specialise in tasks like this; it’d be nonsensical for me to do it instead, regardless of my prima,” Gilahad explains.

“Nonsensical?” the oracle angrily says. “Nonsensical!?” he repeats, a bit louder this time.

Realising how what he said might be considered offensive – as he did imply the oracle’s suggestion to be ridiculous – Gilahad quickly makes to apologise.

“I meant no offense with that,” he says, “I only meant—”

“Do you realise what will happen if, when we arrive, I were to go cry to the Association about your performance?” the oracle interrupts him.

“No?” Gilahad responds.

“What will happen,” the oracle continues, almost yelling, “is that you get excommunicated by both the Association *and* the Church, while receiving no pay whatsoever for your services. Do you want to know *why* that would happen?”

Before Gilahad can utter an exasperated word of response, the oracle continues.

“It’s because I’m infinitely more important than your meagre existence,” he says. “Do you understand that?”

“Yes, I understand,” Gilahad responds, through gritted teeth.

“If you understand,” the oracle yells, “then pull the damned wagon!”

After saying that, the boy retreats back into the inner part of the vehicle, leaving behind a frustrated Gilahad, while Darashan snickers.

“Don’t you dare say anything,” he remarks to the other two, as he takes a seat at the front of the wagon, while the other two continue to smile teasingly at him.

“What I mean by *what you perceive*,” Aldira continues her earlier statement, “is that you can apply illusion not just to vision, but to all other senses as well.”

“The other senses? You mean like hearing and smell?” Evan tilts his head. “But how?”

“You’ve experienced it before, you know?”

“Have I?”

Aldira grins.

“Remember yesterday, when I was injured and outnumbered? If you heard me taunting the enemies, you most likely saw some kind of image.”

“Ah, yes!” Evan recalls. “It was like, an injured beast – ferocious and ready to strike back.”

“That sounds about right,” Aldira continues. “Everyone else did as well, which is why they were frozen in fear for a second – it’s because I infused my voice with magic to instil an image like that in everyone’s mind,” she excitedly explains. “Although I can’t control *exactly* what one sees – only the general sense.”

“That’s so cool!” Evan excitedly responds. “How did you even think of that?”

“What can I say?” she boasts, “The idea just came to me one day. ‘If you can apply illusions to anything, why not something like the air – or, in this case, sound.’”

“You really are as amazing as I thought!”

“Wahaha!” she laughs. “I am, aren’t I!”

She then grins at Evan, still looking at her like an angel descended, and decides to get back on-topic.

“But that’s quite enough of that,” she says. “Let’s get back to the basics.”

“Yes, of course!”

Aldira takes a moment to remember where they were.

“Let’s see...how about we consider the methods to control created illusion?”

“Are there more ways than one?” Evan wonders.

“There *are* more ways than one! Specifically,” she continues, raising her index and middle finger, “there are two of them!”

“That *is* more than one,” Evan concludes.

“Indeed it is,” Aldira concurs, nodding. “But let’s talk about what they are, rather than how many.”

“Well, what are they then?”

“First,” she shouts, raising her index finger at him, almost as if to shush him with the announcement, “we have the manual way, where one dictates every movement of the illusion. This method allows one to make very convincing illusions who seem to respond to stimuli.”

To illustrate, she once again creates The Phantom in her hand, who then proceeds to strike a few different poses.

“Makes sense,” Evan says, nodding along, as looks intriguedly upon the illusion.

“Right,” Aldira agrees. “The downside of this method, however, is that it requires you to pay constant attention to the illusion. Also, for example, if you were to lose sight of it, you would have no way to really control it, as you wouldn’t know what it’s seeing.”

“Question!” Evan sounds out, while raising his hand.

“Yes!” Aldira immediately responds, pointing at him.

“Wouldn’t it also be difficult to do with multiple illusions at once?”

Aldira grins at this assessment.

“That’s right,” she says, impressed with the observation, and happy he’s paying good enough attention to come up with such questions. “Very good!”

“Thank you,” Evan smiles.

“As you said, it also poses an issue when attempting to create multiple illusions at once. That is why the second method was developed: the so-called ‘auto-pilot method,’ where you give the illusion a command, which it’ll continue to do across its duration.”

She now spawns another illusion – a tiny version of herself.

“Is that...you?”

“Yep,” she says, as the mini-Aldira waves at them, before walking off in the other directions.

A few moments later, it walks into a tree and promptly disappears.

“Do note that an illusion does not strictly adhere to one method – with enough practice, you can switch an illusion to or from manual at will.”

She goes over her lesson so far in her mind, saying, mostly to herself, “Was there anything else?”

“I wouldn’t know,” answers Evan.

“Hmm...” she utters, as the feeling she’s forgetting something continues to propagate itself.

“How about I teach you a little trick?” she says, coming up with a little plan as she finishes her consideration.

“A trick?”

Aldira smiles almost mischievously.

“You know how an illusion can only be seen through using the sun prima’s *opsis*?”

“Yes?”

“Well, actually, there *is* a way – a secret method – that will allow anyone to see through illusions, even without being of the sun prima.”

“What is it, what is it?” Evan eagerly wonders.

Aldira shoots him another impish look, leaving an intentionally large pause so as to – very effectively – build up additional suspense. Finally, she pipes up.

“Common sense!” she excitedly presents.

Evan looks disappointedly towards her.

“Huh?”

“Common sense!” she repeats, rubbing in the anticlimactic nature of the answer.

Evan blankly stares at his new teacher and her massive, shit-eating grin, unlike any he’d ever seen before – which doesn’t say much, as he’s never seen one before. After a silence that was just a few seconds too long, Evan opens his mouth to speak, but, using her incredible reaction time, Aldira manages to go first, shushing him with one singular upheld finger.

“For example,” she loudly exclaims, “if I were to do this,” she continues, before suddenly metamorphosising – her body taking on the form of a short, oak-brown trunk, while her arms turn into long, unbending branches, only changing direction at the end of her palm,

dividing into five separate endings. Finally, her hair becomes a beautiful bush of leaves, as her majestic transformation finally comes to a close.

“Weep woop, I am a tree. Wiggle wiggle,” she says, as the two branches of the Aldi-tree move slightly up and down, while Evan continues to look on with a mostly blank expression. In response to the unresponding Evan, Aldira is hit by a sudden flush of embarrassment at her overdone example, causing her to undo her illusion – although much less spectacularly than it went the other way.

“Then,” she continues, with a nervous scratch of her neck, picking up where she had left off before the impromptu performance, “you wouldn’t be very convinced, would you?”

“No, I don’t think I would,” Evan answers, still weirdly stone-faced.

“Right,” Aldira then says, in an attempt to wrap things up favourably. “So, basically, just pay attention to anything unusual, or anyone acting strange, whenever you’re dealing with an illusionist. Got it?”

“Yes,” Evan stoically responds, while Aldira continues to build up a sinking feeling of embarrassment in her gut.

That is, until Evan suddenly burst out laughing for a short moment, before quickly covering it up, taking a deep breath as if to reset his facial expression – to great success.

“I’m sorry,” he apologises, “I didn’t mean to laugh at your lesson.”

Aldira grins a little.

“You were supposed to laugh,” she says.

“Ah, that’s great,” he responds, relieved. “Truly.”

“Right,” Aldira awkwardly lets out.

“I think you made for a great tree.”

A small chuckle escapes Aldira’s lips.

“Thanks,” she says, at the unusual compliment.

“You’re welcome,” Evan responds, without a hint of irony, as an awkward silence comes forth, while Evan continues to smile at his teacher for the day.

“Well then,” Aldira pipes up, “shall we move on to the practical part of the lesson?”

“Yes!” Evan excitedly responds.

“Stop!” the voice of the oracle suddenly sounds out of the wagon, causing Gilahad – who was obediently pulling the wagon – as well as the other two to immediately halt their movements. The oracle emerges from the inner part of the vehicle to stand upon the outer part – a small area between the driver and the ‘resting space,’ hidden behind a curtain, where the oracle had been sitting.

“I am tired, so we shall end things here for the day,” he announces. “We will continue as soon as I awake.”

Gilahad looks at the oracle in disbelief.

“It has yet to even become sundown,” he protests. “I believe it would be wise to continue until dark, at the very least.”

“No,” the oracle responds, firmly refusing. “I wish to rest, and that is final.”

“Can we not continue forward whilst you do so?” Gilahad hopefully interjects.

“You expect me to sleep, when you feel the need to bump the whole wagon up and down every other second?”

“Do you expect me to smooth out the road ahead of us before we travel upon it!?” Gilahad angrily snaps back at him.

“If you truly wish to continue.”

Gilahad grits his teeth at the remark. He feels inclined to chide the brat, but holds back and, instead, tries one last, desperate attempt to make additional headway.

“It’ll take much longer to reach our destination this way.”

“Then go faster tomorrow,” the oracle replies, before finally retreating back behind the curtain that marked the beginning of the inner part of the wagon.

Feeling Darashan hovering quip-readily behind him, Gilahad remarks, “Don’t you dare say a word.”

“I wasn’t planning to.” he dryly responds.

“Then why did you?”

Darashan puts on an apologetic face.

“I think he means to say that he’s sorry,” Evelyn interjects.

“Yeah I got that much,” Gilahad responds, unable to see the humour in their joking about – although he *does* appreciate the effort.

He sighs. “Shall we set up camp early? It looks like it’ll be a short day tomorrow.”

The other two nod and begin their preparations, while Aldira and Evan were just finishing up their training session.

And so ends the first day of their travels with the oracle.

Chapter X

“Alright then, shall we get started?” Evelyn says, as she and Evan find an empty and quiet place to sit down.

“...yes,” the boy meekly responds.

The next day has arrived, and, while waiting for the oracle to wake up, Gilahad suggested they determine who would be next in line to be Evan’s teacher for the day. Surprisingly enough, Evelyn immediately volunteered. It was a lucky break for the other two, really, as neither of them had gotten around to preparing for it – Gilahad, in all his stressing about the oracle, had completely forgotten to make a lesson plan, while Darashan simply hadn’t bothered. As such, it was decided, and Evelyn lead Evan a bit away from camp, returning us to the present.

Evan, however, does not seem quite as energised as her.

This, of course, does not escape the woman, who immediately locks onto it.

“Let’s talk for a bit, shall we?” she suggests, prompting Evan to tilt his head in confusion.

“Talk? What about the lesson?” he sputters.

“We can leave it until later. For now, I’d like to get better acquainted; I do believe we’ve started off on the wrong foot, after all.”

“I guess?” the boy responds, unsure.

“Yes,” she decisively speaks up, to affirm her earlier proclamation. “Firstly, I’d like to apologise again.”

Suddenly, she bows down, her forehead almost to the ground, prompting Evan to panickily tell her off.

“Ah, please don’t do that,” he hastily puts out. “To bow before a human...”

“No, it’s simply proper etiquette when giving an honest apology,” she responds, before continuing, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, it’s fine, so please get up!” he pleads, and Evelyn complies, going back to a sitting position.

“Then, can I consider my apology accepted?”

“...yeah, sure,” he responds, although he’s clearly not convinced still.

“Let’s move on, then, to, umm,” she says, trailing off a little as she decides on a topic. “Ah, what about this,” she finally pipes up, as an idea comes to mind. “You’re from the eastern reservoir, right?”

At this presumption, Evan seems surprised.

“How’d you know?”

“Hm? Well, it was an assumption based on your skin.”

“My...skin?”

Seeing his confusion, Evelyn makes to further elaborate on what, to her, is common sense.

“Well, the further east you go, the darker one’s skin, usually. Darashan, for example, is from the eastern fringes of Elbe, while I and all my pastiness are from the west.”

“I see,” Evan says, interestedly nodding along, before a thought strikes him. “But what about your uncle?”

“Ah, well, I suppose he’s a bit of a different case: he’s lived in the east for so long that he’s gotten tanned, so I can see your confusion.”

“Then, is Aldira from the west as well? Or is there something like a reverse tan?”

Evelyn cracks up at this, but makes sure to suppress a loud burst of laughter – it doesn’t fit her image to laugh out loud, after all.

“No, I don’t think such a thing exists, unfortunately,” she responds to Evan’s ridiculous, yet strangely imaginable idea, before addressing the truth of their last party member’s birthland.

“No, Aldira was born in what she calls ‘La La Land,’ – a non-existent place, which I strongly presume resides somewhere in central Elbe.”

After this response, Evan seems to be left with more questions than before the answer.

“How can it reside anywhere if it doesn’t exist?” he asks, like a curious child. “And, more importantly, how can Aldira be born there?”

Evelyn chuckles at his bewilderment.

“Basically, she was most likely born somewhere in central Elbe, but she refuses to admit it,” she finally explains, in more obvious terms.

“I see...” he trails off, as he starts to assign memory space for this newly acquired information.

“But,” Evelyn speaks up, breaking his focus – or whatever it was, “I’d like to return to my earlier question for a moment.”

In response, Evan blankly looks at her, his patented mildly curious expression covering his face, as he waits patiently to find out what she’s getting at.

“What I’m wondering is,” she continues, “if you’re from the eastern reservoir, how did you end up all the way at Villavar?”

“Villavar?”

“Ah, it’s the town where we met.”

“That village, huh...” he says, as he starts to think of how he arrived there, exactly, but seems to fail to arrive at a satisfactory answer. “Well, I don’t really know. Ollie and I simply flew off in a random direction, and that’s where we ended up, after a while.”

“So you flew all the way across Elbe? That’s quite amazing,” she says, respectfully nodding at the accomplishment.

“Well,” Evan responds, rubbing the back of his head with a subdued laugh, “I didn’t really do much – it was all Ollie.”

“He’s quite an impressive creature. I’ve always thought Griffin’s were a majestic species, but it seems they’re extremely caring and intelligent as well.”

“Yes,” Evan says, fondly smiling at the mention of his best friend, “I couldn’t have survived all those days without him.”

At this statement, Evelyn suddenly becomes greatly perplexed.

“All those days? It wouldn’t take *that* long to fly across Elbe, surely.”

“Uh, no? I’m not sure, really,” the boy responds, counter-confused at his conversational partner’s confusion.

“In the first place, why did you turn around at Villavar?”

“Uh, well,” he stammers as a result of Evelyn’s sudden interrogation, “as far as I’m concerned, we flew in the same direction the whole way.”

Evelyn remains puzzled, even after this revelation.

“Is...that so?” she mutters, mulling the situation over.

“Yes, I do believe so.”

“Maybe you flew further east then, and circled all the way around to arrive in Villavar?” she says, throwing an idea out into the open.

“Wouldn’t I end up at the end of the earth then?” he offers up, causing Evelyn to giggle.

“The world’s round, Evan – it doesn’t end anywhere,” she matter-of-factly explains, rightening his misconception, which, unfortunately, only serves to confuse the boy more, as he very clearly starts to try and imagine how it would work in his head, with a very apparent lack of success.

With a mellow expression and a contented sigh, she decides to elaborate further.

“It’s a sphere, like this,” she gestures a ball-shape with her hands. “So, you can go around it like this,” she continues, tracing a line across the figure she’d drawn in the air.

“Oh, that makes sense, I get it!” he happily exclaims, glad to be rid of that mystery.

“Can you tell me more about your journey?” Evelyn then asks, after a short silence befalls them.

“I,” he meekly responds, don’t think it’ll be that interesting.”

“Regardless,” she reassures, once again putting on her smile of motherly concern, “I’d like to hear it.”

“Hmm,” he thinks, “where do I start, then?”

“Why not just start at the beginning?” Evelyn suggests. “You left the reservoir, and then...” she trails off, gesturing for Evan to continue where she stopped.

“And then,” he says, doing just that, “Ollie and I excitedly flew off in a random direction, since we didn’t really make a plan for where to go or anything like that.”

For a moment, he stops, seeming to think back on what he was feeling in the moment.

“We were kind of, revelling in our newfound freedom, I suppose? For a while, we just,” he stops again, to gesture in the air, as if to indicate the space that could be found there. “We just flew.”

“Freedom, you say?” Evelyn wonders, locking on to one of the things he said. “Were you not free in the reservoir?”

Evan looks melancholically into the distance at this question.

“I was...restricted, I guess. I never had a time where it was up to me, and no one else, what I would do.” He meekly laughs, as he pauses for a moment. “It was a little scary, to be honest – I had no idea what to do at all.”

“Yes, I can imagine,” Evelyn responds, with a nod. “So, you flew off,” she continues, reminding Evan of where he was before her interruption.

“We flew off,” he once again picks up, “and then, when Ollie got tired or I got hungry, we’d find a place to rest – and then,” he heartily smiles, starting to get very into the story-telling, “even though half the reason we’d landed was so Ollie could rest, he would go out and forage for food, or catch a fish for us to chow down on, and then I’d snuggle into his warm feathers, and we’d sleep the day away.”

“It sounds like you were enjoying yourself,” Evelyn comments.

“Yes,” Evan responds, “all thanks to Ollie.”

“You couldn’t ask for a better companion, could you?”

Evan wildly shakes his head.

“No, I really couldn’t.”

Suddenly, his happy expression seems to droop.

“But then, we ended up flying over water, as far as the eye could see,” he says, “and poor Ollie couldn’t get a break anywhere, so he had to push himself all the way until we found land, many, many hours later.”

His expression depresses even further.

“And I weighed him down that whole time...”

“I’m sure he pulled through with pleasure,” Evelyn reassures, seeing the downtrodden boy before her.

“But...” he mutters, trailing off immediately after beginning the sentence.

“If he minded that much,” Evelyn reasons, “he wouldn’t be here with you now, would he?”

“I guess so,” Evan responds, sounding more consoled than before. “Regardless of his experience, though, Ollie was dead tired after we landed. That’s why we stayed there for a few days, while I took care of him. He *did* have to reject a lot of the ‘food’ I gathered in the end, though,” he says, with a self-mocking chuckle.

“Our longer-term rest came to an end when we were suddenly surrounded by a bunch of people, who started yelling stuff in some language I couldn’t understand. They seemed very angry at us.”

“Ah, you must’ve landed in Sycaea then. They’re *extremely* uptight about transgressors, so they were most likely trying to chase you away,” Evelyn explains.

“Well,” Evan agrees, “all the pointy spears aimed at us *did* seem to give that impression. That’s why we took off again as soon as we could.”

“A sound decision.”

“And then, after a few more moons passed, we ended up at another ocean. I told Ollie we could go in another direction, but he seemed to want to brave it again.”

“Elbe is his homeland, after all – he was probably being drawn back to it.”

“Maybe he was, I don’t know. In any case, after taking a full day’s rest to prepare, we braved it as well.”

The corners of his mouth curl up again.

“Ollie seemed a lot better than the time before, as well. He was still very tired when we finally found land, so we decided to take a rest at the village we saw – not to mention we were quite thrilled to finally run into another sign of civilisation.”

He chuckles again, now, in the same way as last time.

“People didn’t seem quite as excited to meet us, though. The first thing we were told – in a language I can actually speak, luckily – was to ‘put that thing away in the stable, at least, since it was scaring people.’”

“Ollie, you mean?”

“Yes, that’s right. I didn’t want to make anyone angry, so I ended up not admonishing that person,” he says, sorrily. “I still feel a little bad.”

“In any case,” he continues, brightening back up, “the stablemaster didn’t seem to want to keep Ollie either, but agreed after I insisted that he wouldn’t find anyone as well-behaved as him. Something about being able to say he could even keep a griffin?”

“Pft,” Evelyn scoffs in response. “How disingenuous.”

“...yes, very,” Evan agrees, going with the flow, as he has no actual idea what that means.

“And then,” he continues, “I noticed a crowd forming after walking aimlessly around town for a bit, and, well,” he pauses for a moment. “I guess you know the rest.”

"It sounds like you've had quite the experience before we met."

"I...suppose you could call it that," he responds. "I don't think it was anything special."

"Anything is special if you do it for the first time."

"Hm," he grunts in agreement.

"Speaking of that," Evelyn picks up, "where did you learn that technique you used?"

Evan raises an eyebrow.

"Technique?"

"You know, the one you used to heal the injured child," she clarifies. "I've never seen anything quite like it – most people simply channel through their hands, rather than using a full-blown embrace."

"Ah, well," Evan responds, "I never really thought of it as a technique, or anything like that."

For a moment, he thinks back on when he first started to use it.

"A long time ago," he reminisces, "when Ollie was still smaller than me, he got himself gravely injured while playing around, and somehow found his way to me. I had no idea what to do, though, so I held him close and wished he would get better and then, some way, through some miracle, he actually did. Afterwards, whenever someone got injured, I'd try to do the same, and they'd magically get better," he laughs nervously. "I didn't know I was *actually* using magic."

"So you're self-taught, then? That's even more impressive."

Suddenly, Evan seems to be reminded of something and starts to fidget, looking away from her, with an occasional peek, as the conversation falls flat. Noticing the boy's reluctance to say whatever is on his mind, Evelyn decides to bring it up herself.

"Is something the matter?" she asks, breaking the stalemate, which causes Evan to jump a little.

"Ah, well, that is, um," he stammers, before finally taking a deep breath to catch his bearings. "I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away," she invites.

"Then," he says, doing exactly that, although still a little sheepishly, "why did you think I was the saviour?"

"Ah, well, I suppose that *is* a good question," she offers, "but I wouldn't really know how to answer it. It was simply something of a feeling, to be quite frank."

"A feeling?"

"I guess I thought that that was exactly what a saviour would be like?"

"...I see," he meekly mutters.

"Yes," Evelyn agrees, although she's not quite sure to what.

“May I ask another question?” Evan then pipes up again, seeming to have gathered his courage.

“Go ahead.”

“Why,” he asks, taking a deep breath to catch his bearings, “why did you lie to me that day?”

Oh geez, Evelyn thinks, as the boy suddenly goes straight to the heart of the matter, which she had been trying to make amends for this entire time, more or less. She has, however, been expecting it to come up at some point, so she’s already prepared to answer, although it still takes her slightly by surprise.

“Aldira’s told you about the oracle, no?” she answers with a seemingly unrelated question.

“Yes,” Evan responds, already used to the roundabout way of answering, where one first starts with a whole story before getting to the point – as Aldira had done it multiple times the day before, while convincing him.

“Well, the ones who witnessed her final revelation became very interested in finding out *exactly* what it meant – sometimes, to the point of fanaticism. So zealously did they go about this, that it ended up becoming a trend, a movement and, finally, a belief. They formed a religion, by the name of ‘the Church of the Saviour,’ and they slowly but surely gained followers as time converged towards the point of prediction. And now, as we stand on the verge of it, they’ve become so influential that one can even be tried for advocating a false saviour.”

“Tried?” Evan frantically exclaims. “For what punishment?”

“Ah, well, it’s not like they have the authority to put you to death, or something along those lines – it wouldn’t be abiding by separation of church and state, after all. It will, however, get you shunned by the church, which will entail a great loss of available services over-all.”

“Is that the reason then? So *you* wouldn’t risk that loss?” he says, a hint of scorn to be found in his voice.

“That is...half, I suppose,” she responds, noticing this answer will not net her any forgiveness – Evan is right to note that it *is* a bit selfish, even if he was only hinting at it.

“What’s the other half, then?”

“I believe it would be cruel to tell someone they were the saviour on a whim, based only off a hunch. If, later on, it turns out they’re not, well, wouldn’t that be the worst?”

A satisfied grin now surfaces on Evan’s face.

“So that was it, huh?” he happily says. “Good, good.”

“You seem pleased,” Evelyn remarks, a bit surprised at the way his mood switched. “May I ask why it makes you so glad to hear that?”

“Ah, well,” he nervously scratches his cheek. “I guess, since you seem like such a nice person, I’m happy to know you had a good reason to do what you did.”

“You really see the good in people, don’t you?” Evelyn responds, unable to hold back a smile of her own at the nature of the person before her.

“Isn’t that normal?”

“Our inner cynics have outgrown most of us, unfortunately – you won’t find that optimist in us so quickly anymore.”

As Evan grows visibly dejected at this sad truth, as his eyes fill with a sympathy that could easily be misunderstood for pity, if one doesn’t know better.

“Which is why,” she continues, adding a positive spin to her gloomy proclamation, “it’s a good thing that you’re with us, to remind us of that. Maybe we can stand to learn a thing or two from you as well?”

“Maybe,” he non-affirmatively acknowledges, as their talk seems to come to its natural conclusion.

Evelyn looks up at the sky to find the sun, noting how long they most likely have left.

“It appears we’ve got some time still before sundown – shall we move on with the lesson?”

“Yes!” Evan excitedly exclaims in response, with the energy Evelyn had expected to see in him in the first place.