Vandheer Nillis

Fall

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# Prologue

‘… the inner walls are already on the verge of ruin. Cries and echoes fill these walls. We have little time, Ehrudin.’

‘I know that, *Arukhar*, but why are we plunging these forgotten cellars?’

‘It is necessary. If no one acts now, we will not live to see the daylight tomorrow.’

The *Arukhar* turned his head around. Ehrudin held the torch firmly in his hand.

‘But what is that you seek?’

‘That which can end this conflict, this chaos, the madness that rules the world.’

They descended the stairs in a steady pace.

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘If it wasn’t, it wouldn’t be strong enough.’

‘Then what is it, sire? What can possibly stop them?’

‘Something we have always been lied to, about. That which we have been taught, Ehrudin, is in fact gravely wrong.’

They reached the end of the stairs. A wall stood in front of them, though it was in reality a gate. A stone wall, with a carving resembling what rested behind it – a single circle, with vines reaching from it in all directions.

‘We were taught that darkness is nothing more but the absence of light, on our first days here. We were given the reasons, the arguments, the foundations for this belief, but there is one flaw in it all. They had no evidence.’

Black cracks crawled from the bottom of the wall, spreading out, and eventually the slivers grew to make the whole wall black. It looked like the wall faded from existence, as it slowly revealed what was kept behind it.

‘And I found things that hint at something else than our teachings.’

Ehrudin gasped as the torch light showed them both what rested behind the wall, in the deepest parts of the undergrounds.

‘Do you see this, Ehrudin? This is that which I shall use to put an end to the madness that wreaks havoc outside. This is what has been kept a secret from us for so long.’

‘*Arukhar*, stop speaking in riddles! Explain to me, please!’

The *Arukhar* moved into the room that was once walled off. He turned around, catching Ehrudin’s eyes.

‘This is *Darkness*, Ehrudin. This is the power that has been sealed for so long, and as a consequence, we lost our greatest power. In our naivety, we believed that we could make do without this power for centuries, and now, the consequences have fallen upon us.’

‘What is this power then?’

The *Arukhar* moved towards the black core of darkness. Its tendrils, long and thin, and countless, reached out in every direction except for where the *Arukhar* was approaching it. The core itself was constantly changing on its surface, but the change itself seemed ethereal – darkness, and then, an abyss unveiled in a moment as short as the blink of the eye.

‘No one knows, anymore, what it is that this *Darkness* can do. I have read many things. Some claim that it can cleanse, and yet it cannot restore. It can destroy like no other force, and in spite of this power, it can prevent disasters as if it was nothing but child’s play. The power of darkness isn’t even legendary, mythical even, Ehrudin. It is a completely forgotten power, one with an unknown potential. If it was not dangerous, there would be no reason to seal it. But since it has been sealed here for so long…’

The *Arukhar* moved closer to the black core. Its arms – vines – came closer to him, hovering at his sides, not a single one coming any closer than an arm’s length. They eventually surrounded him.

‘*Arukhar*! Don’t! Why are you doing this?’

‘I am doing this because I have *nothing*, Ehrudin!’

Ehrudin fell on his knees.

‘For how long now, have I served my masters? How has my patience been rewarded? What have *I* gained, in exchange of this excruciating agony? You know my entire life, Ehrudin. I have revealed everything to you, I have exposed myself. Yet you do not understand?!’

‘Life has greater value than this, *Arukhar*!’

‘It is exactly for that reason that I am doing this, Ehrudin! If I shall never live to understand what it is that makes life worth all this suffering, then I shall make sure no one else will! Let me be… the ultimate sacrifice.’

The vines of darkness closed in from every direction.

# Darkness

‘… and I want all of you to search every corner and under every stone you see, no excuses will be tolerated! And don’t let the leaves blind you either, he can be anywhere! Cut down the trees if you must, but don’t let the torches near anything!’

The soldiers were coming close. He knew that. He was exhausted, he wondered if his legs would still allow orders.

‘Sir, I hear breathing. What if it’s just an animal?’

‘He *is* an animal! He is just like the rest of his like, filthy scum, all of them! Go and inspect anything you deem suspicious, anything that is harmful to the kingdom!’ the officer said.

‘Yes, sir!’

The big stone was the only thing between him and the soldiers. He had rested there for only a few minutes until the soldiers had managed to track him down. Or so he thought; maybe there were more of them, scattered of wider areas. As if that mattered anyway.

‘He’s here!’

‘Do whatever you must, but bring him here alive!’

He looked at the knife he held. What use would it be, to even try resisting?

Footsteps came rapidly closer to him. Looming shadows showed up on the ground in front. He knew what the soldiers held. Swords, spears, and some had torches were attached to the metal spears, whereas others held an axe in the other hand. The ones with the torches were hesitant on moving forward, intent on not burning him, it seemed. Stabbing people along with burning them was obviously more painful than just a stab. As if neither was painful enough for the purpose behind their mission.

One pair of feet came silently closer. The soldiers, with clinking armor, moved aside.

He didn’t bother looking up.

‘Well, well, well. The last of the Anzareth,’ a taunting voice said.

He looked up at the officer. Arrogant would be a suitable word for both his looks and attitude.

‘Vandheer Nillis, youngest member of the Artiphex Nexus. You all give yourselves away too easily. How can one *not* know what you are, and even where you are? Even a blind and deaf *child* would be able to find you.’

‘So you had to lick the ground in order to track me down, like a crippled dog?’

Several spears came close to him. They were all pointed at his throat.

‘Tie him up. We shall return at once.’

He did not bother resisting their pull. They tied his ankles and wrists firmly and even put him on a board. They gave him the luxury of resting even while taken captive. It suited him perfectly, except for that he felt one of them cutting his hair with a knife.

‘Your head will be the trophy of a lifetime, Vandheer Nillis. *My* trophy.’

‘Dream on.’

He drifted asleep as he shook calmly from side to side. He figured most men had had their share of carrying others, after the war. If it could be called one.

Sunlight struck his face, forcing him to wake up. The soldiers had been kind enough, or ignorant, to tie his hands in front of him instead of behind him. He rubbed his nose a bit and scratched behind his ears. A good night’s rest, for once. While he had been carried on a tray, the soldiers had been working. How ironic. And even now, they were asleep.

A knife from a sleeping guard’s hip came loose by an invisible force, held by a steady, but invisible hand. It cut the rope at Vandheer’s wrists and ankles.

He got up in his knees, pretending to still be tied, and looked at his surroundings. He spotted a little camp, with a bonfire in the middle of it. A few soldiers sat by it, unarmored, most probably talking together. The camp was on an open space, hardened dirt and patches of grass. Far out, a block of grey stood at the horizon.

Vandheer felt like going towards the bonfire. The urge was there, but as always, he resisted it.

Before he even noticed that he had gone to his feet, some soldiers shouted, words like “cut”, “rope”, “untied” almost escaping his ears.

There was nothing to be seen in the horizon, except for the forest where the soldiers had captured him. They had surely taken rounds at carrying him. It was not a short distance at all.

He took the other direction. He ran towards the block of grey. As far as he knew, it was his only hope.

The soldiers tried futilely to catch up with him as he ran towards the grey block at the horizon. Their armor slowed them down, and he was quite sure that his legs were faster. A good night’s sleep helped a lot, too.

He did not know whether the grey block got any closer, but as he ran, time became more and more distant to him. His legs began going on their own. Time just vanished. Patches of grass on the hard, light brown dirt passed by in a flash.

Until his left leg suddenly made him cry out in pain.

Far behind him, the soldiers told each other to run faster and hurry up with catching the Anzareth, before he used his powers to heal himself. He heard none of it; there was only his leg, and the arrowhead which was stuck in it.

By the time the soldiers came, one of them bent down beside him. He only heard the words “beat him” before he was knocked unconscious by a blow to the head.

Throbbing pain welled up in his head as he woke up. The sound of shattered pottery didn’t contribute to making it any better, or worse, luckily.

‘He’s awake!’ a man’s voice shouted.

The headache faded, and he noticed he was sweating on his forehead. It was likely that it was there the soldiers had hit him, with whatever they had which was hard. Maybe a bludgeon, though it wasn’t hard enough.

‘Put the spears away!’

‘Are you insane? This man is of the Anzareth! He could…’

‘He is still my patient!’

The female voice managed to make the soldier pointing the spear at Vandheer’s throat move the weapon away.

‘Please leave me alone. I will take responsibility if you report this.’

‘Healers are too important for punishment,’ the soldier said as he went towards something which went to the left, and then to the right. The soldier was gone.

‘Are you okay?’ the woman asked.

‘Everything is a blur as far as I know.’

‘Blink a few times.’

Vandheer obeyed without forethought. It worked, though he noticed only small changes in detail. He was lying on a bed, looking up at a white ceiling. He looked around. A small table was to his right, along with a cup. The door that the soldier had gone through had an engraving, resembling a goat’s head. The floor was covered by a simple, red carpet.

And to his left, was the source of a female voice.

‘How is your leg?’

Vandheer was unsure of what it was his mouth had just said, but “fine” was among the words. He couldn’t help staring. Red wavy hair reaching just below her shoulders, strong blue eyes, no freckles, and beautiful. He didn’t take notice of the fact that she was sitting on a chair. Or that they were the only ones in the room.

Vandheer wondered if that bludgeon had actually killed him.

‘Could you repeat that? I didn’t quite hear.’

‘I’m… fine, thank you.’

‘Gratitude, huh. They told me you did not know of it. What more about you Anzareth is it that we’ve got wrong?’

He had no idea whether it was just idle talk or she was actually trying to have a conversation; he answered nonetheless. She was writing notes on a thin wooden board she held in one hand, writing with the other. The sound of pen on paper was constant, interrupted only by the beginning of a new word.

‘That we are like most people.’

She looked up from her notes.

‘I’d like to see that.’ And then she smiled.

He felt his mouth open. Vandheer could only keep his tongue inside.

‘Well, at least you are like most men. All you see is what’s on the outside, and most of you are blind when it comes to what’s inside. You don’t even pause to think about yourself, or what to do. Rushing headfirst into battle, thinking the enemy is evil – it’s always the same. And sometimes, you are right. But only sometimes.’

‘I’ve seen none who are right about war.’

She put down her notes again. She put the pen away too.

‘I’ll check on you later. Don’t try to escape either, your leg is still recovering. And don’t even think about escaping through the window; it’s locked.’

‘I thought you were the lock.’

‘The lock on the window or the door?’

‘The lock on my thinking.’

She laughed.

Laughter – how long since he had heard that. But since when had someone’s laughter made him… smile?

‘Did I say something wrong?’

‘No, you are just funny. That bludgeon made you delirious. Just lie down and get some rest.’

As if to leave the room, she instead went towards the night table and picked up the cup. She held the cup in front of him.

‘Open your mouth.’

He obeyed.

‘Drink.’

He did.

She went towards the door with the cup, and when she was about to close the door, she looked at him one last time. And smiled.

‘Sweet dreams, red-eye.’

The last word echoed in his mind. It seemed so distant, yet it was less than one month ago. And then the darkness of closed eyes crashed into his sight. His mind slipped away into a realm devoid of time.

By the time he woke up again, that… beauty, was back. He found no other words suitable for someone like her. She sat on the chair to his left this morning too, already started on writing her notes.

His mind felt a bit clearer.

‘I told them you would still be weary and that the arrow has brought a disease upon you, but do you think you can walk?’

‘As long as you are around.’

‘Don’t say things like that. Most men fall under my distaste. You won’t be an exception. I still suggest that you stay in bed though, your leg hasn’t healed completely yet.’

As if to disprove what she had told “them”, he removed the thick blanket and got out of the bed, and stood in front of her. The pain was gone. It was only now he noticed that his chest was bare. It was too late by the time he looked at the beauty. A thought struck him, as he noticed how she didn’t blush, or react at the sight of his chest. Of course, she had to be used to seeing men stripped of their clothes.

‘I feel perfectly fine.’

‘Don’t lie to me.’

‘Kick my leg.’

She blinked. A grumpy look covered her face.

‘Get back in bed.’

‘Kick me.’

She paused.

‘You asked for it…’

She put down her notes, and grabbed his left leg. Her fingers were soft, and careful. She squeezed his leg harder. And then she kicked him, but gently – if one could describe a kick that way. She moved the chair away, put her notes on it, and stood in front of Vandheer.

She was a about half a head smaller than him, and her white clothing – which his eyes had focused at only now – hung loosely on her body, her thin arms having only a little spare space. The blouse’s neckline was close to her throat. As if the clothing meant anything to Vandheer. She was a beauty nonetheless.

‘You’re not like most people in the slightest. You heal too quickly. Perhaps they were right, after all.’

‘One advantage is rewarded with prejudice, is that it?’

‘Don’t put me in their group. I merely stated a fact.’

‘So did I. What do they want?’

‘Something. I don’t know what, as if a healer needs to know anything other than who to take care of and what injury it is about.’

She put her hand on his breast. He felt himself swallow. And then she pushed him back onto the bed, plain as day.

‘I don’t like men as tall as you. You make me feel little.’

‘We are all little. Some are just more or less little than others.’

She giggled. ‘If that’s how you choose to see things, I’m fine with that. Just make sure you don’t take that kind of funny tone with them, okay?’

As if someone was eavesdropping, a man entered through the door. He was not a soldier; he looked more like a servant, and yet not. Maybe one of the organizers, or the higher standing servants.

Vandheer figured the soldiers had brought him to the grey block he had been running to.

‘His Majesty inquires about how much time a simple question requires in order to be pronounced, Catherine Rosenthal.’

‘The patient is perfectly capable of walking, perhaps even running.’

‘Very well. Guards!’

Two lightly armored men came close the door, their armor rattling lightly, coming to a halt shortly.

The beauty – Catherine Rosenthal – looked back at him. He stared into the blue ocean of her eyes.

‘Tell me your name.’

‘Vandheer Nillis.’ He hadn’t even thought a single word before he pronounced his name.

‘Vandheer Nillis… a name to remember, indeed.’ And then she smiled.

Vandheer knew what to do. He went towards the servant, who held out a shirt. He pulled it on, and, with a signal given from the servant, the guards signaled to Vandheer to walk in front of them. The door closed behind them.

‘Go left.’

The corridors were mostly empty, but a few running servants were to be seen every now and then. Trays with covered content were run by young, hurrying men and women, a few of them still in their childhood. The white marble floor was flat and smooth; there were no cracks in it, in fact, it seemed that the floor was just one big chunk of flawless marble. The marble floor wasn’t cold to Vandheer’s bare feet either; he felt no heat or cold from it at all.

The corridor walls had paintings placed in the middle between each intersection. The guards instructed him on the directions, guiding him through staircases in the end. At the top floor – which it seemed to be, to Vandheer – they came in front of a pair of two, huge marble doors, with an engraved emblem – a goat’s head, but instead of normal horns, the horns went far beyond that of an average; the horn split up and reached several random heights on the doors, but they were symmetric.

He guessed that it was some sort of grand room. And when the doors split, he was proven correct.

Vandheer had never seen any of the like. It was the throne hall. The white marble floor seemed to *shine*, and to each side of the hall, there were open windows on the top, flags hanging between each. Two rows of soldiers were lined close to the walls, all of them holding spears, their sheathed swords hanging at their hips. Their armor was polished, and the emblem of Elzraei was emblazoned on their shoulder armor.

He whistled. The king himself sat on the throne at the end of the hall. The throne was placed on a platform elevated from the rest of the hall by a quarter of his leg. Three minor thrones accompanied it, all seats occupied. The royal family itself was gathered in front of him. Vandheer was unsure whether he should have considered it an honor or a bad sign. The guards stopped him at the bottom of the stairs.

The king, dressed richly in gold-weaved red clothing, rings covering his fingers, sat with a stern expression, his arms leaning on the armrests. The queen was dressed in the like, but the prince and princess were clothed in somewhat humble clothes. The prince wore a red robe, while the princess wore a white one. Instead of being weaved with gold, the prince’s robe had silver-weavings. The princess had no weavings at all on her clothes, only a ring. He had no idea why they were dressed so differently, the royal family.

To the left, to the four thrones, one high-standing servant walked closer to Vandheer. As far as he knew, this one had probably been one for decades. The woman’s grey hair was bundled up behind her head.

‘Your Majesty, may I present Vandheer Nillis, member of the *Artiphex Nexus*, and of the people of the *Anzareth*.’

The servant walked back to her previous position, face blank of any expression whatsoever. Lifelong training was rewarded with skill. That much was obvious. He wondered if the royal family had the same training.

Silenced consumed the throne hall. Only the occasional sound of breathing came by.

‘Vandheer Nillis…’ the king said. He stepped up from his throne, and circled Vandheer slowly as he spoke.

‘It has come to my attention that the Artiphex Nexus possesses incredible powers… or rather, incredulous. Capability of flattening a city; burning a forest in the blink of an eye; turning light into shadow; summed up, killing all life. I find these… gossips, to be highly… unrealistic. These rumors have spread like wildfire the last few years, and have set people’s mind upside down… or so it would seem.’

The king stopped when he had circled around Vandheer once, and pulled out a sheet of paper from his sleeve. He held it right in front of Vandheer’s eyes.

‘What do you see, member of the Nexus? What is it that this paper means?’

Vandheer looked at the sheet. He read it again. And again. And again. One more time. Then another. All he saw was just random scratches at a slightly tattered sheet of paper.

‘I see nothing.’

Something hard hit his cheekbone. He fell down on the floor, but managed to stop his fall a bit with his arms, turning around while descending.

‘Do you take me for a fool, Vandheer Nillis?! I know this sheet is enchanted with your kind’s cursed witchery! And you *will* tell me what is written on it!’

A soldier pulled him up to his feet, and stepped back once Vandheer was looking at the paper hanging from the king’s hand.

‘If you do not tell me truthfully what is written, you will not live to learn the consequences.’

Vandheer could hear the seriousness in the king’s voice. And the hate.

*I have no choice.*

He shut his eyes. He slowed down his breathing.

His eyes felt weary at first, then wet. The wetness faded slowly as he waited for it to finish. He opened his eyes.

What had once been in the middle of his sight now seemed to be much closer. Colors appeared and vanished. The sheet of paper became clear. And red.

A voice exploded in his head. He held his hands to his ears, but to no avail. Each word was from a different voice, male and female, their intonation varying with the sound of agony, rage, madness, desperation, fear, sorrow – all of the words had certain feelings in them.

*Heed our words, last of the Artiphex Nexus. That you have opened your eyes to this can mean only one thing – our secrets and the tools of old are no longer in our possession. As the last of us, of the Nexus, it is now your time. And know that the one who has forced you into looking into this paper, is but one of many. Beware, last of the Nexus – your enemies are many, and powerful. Their strength and numbers will increase by the day, perhaps even by the minute; you cannot allow them to outrun you.*

The voice stopped. Vandheer looked around for its source. Instead, arms of darkness suddenly came from the air, and streams of shadow flied through the open windows – they were coming, slowly but menacing, as if the world of the dead was about to consume the castle.

Instead of consuming anything, the arms of darkness avoided everything except for one thing. They were coming towards him. They surrounded him. The darkness was blacker than night itself, and whirling around him. Small areas clear of darkness enabled him to look past the spinning darkness around him. It did not comfort him. The terrifying screams from around him told of fear and pain. He soon stopped hearing all of that.

The darkness took hold of his arms. He lost footing – he came off the ground. He looked down. The dark stream was circling his body.

A wheezing voice, full of desperation and panic whispered into his head. It then turned into an earsplitting scream at the end. He didn’t understand what the piercing noise was trying to tell him.

The darkness was everything. Vandheer saw nothing. His heart was racing, so full of fear it seemed it wanted to liberate itself from Vandheer’s chest. The sound of whirling air screamed in his ears, the darkness desired to become one with his eyes.

And then it vanished, the same way it had appeared out of thin air. He was lying on the ground. He got up on his feet, his head aching. By the time his head was clear, he looked around.

The soldiers were all knocked to the ground, spears lying on the white marble floor. The royal family was no longer seated at the thrones. In fact, it seemed like no one had even been there in the first place.

*Flee from that place, last of the Nexus!*

Vandheer turned around immediately. There was no one around him. The throne hall was completely empty.

*You have to flee now, this is your only opportunity!*

‘Why should I escape the castle?’ Vandheer shouted. The answer came from his mind.

*I do not have time to explain, child, but as things are, you cannot afford to stay at that place! If you cannot escape without knowing the full reason, then know that your life is at stake!*

The voice was talking to him. It was an old woman.

But was he truly the last of the Artiphex?

*What are you waiting for, you fool! They are coming for you as I speak, and…*

The voice was cut short by an arrow which flew right by Vandheer. He ran for the double doors and pushed them open.

It felt like pushing a common wooden door. He stopped for a few seconds until the voice came back to remind of his life being threatened. He kept running.

He had no idea where to run, but he ran as fast as he could. His heart was leaping, and if it had been outside his body, he was confident it would have grown legs. Vandheer managed to find the exit by looking through some open windows.

For a wonder, there were no servants to be seen in the corridors.

By the time he had managed to escape from the castle, Vandheer had already blended in with the local population. At least, as best as he could. His red eyes and black hair was what made him stand out among the locals. One month ago, that combination was not an unusual thing at all.

Vandheer had no idea what to do. He was on the run from the king himself, and any civil guards who had learned of what had happened within the castle would surely have noticed him by now. Any innkeeper would remember him, and people in general didn’t pass by him without noticing his hair, especially his eyes. Most of the locals had brown hair, some were blonde. And, he was taller. The market and the shops that lined the streets were numerous, inns occasionally standing in the middle with their names painted on a hanging sign. Some didn’t even have a name. As he wandered aimlessly in the city, he noticed where the market and the civil residences were. He stole a hooded cloak when he passed by a shop and quickly covered himself, searching for the voice.

It was when he was in a narrow alley that the voice came back.

*So, is there nothing anyone can do for you, child?*

He spoke quietly back. ‘My looks are suspicious, and any guards at the city walls would probably suspect me of having escaped the castle.’

*Hmm. Very well then. Come to my house.*

Vandheer waited for the directions.

‘Well, how?’

*You were told* something*, were you not?*

Vandheer looked up at the sky. It was clear, but the sun was not in the right position to light up the narrow alley. Who was this woman? Even though he should have suspected her of manipulating him, she was the only one who could help. Or so she appeared to be.

‘Won’t anyone notice this?’

*If you use your powers the right way, no one will.*

‘You wouldn’t mind telling me how?’

*Oh I wouldn’t, dear you, but I do not possess your powers. I have my own, as you can see, or rather, hear.*

Vandheer gave up. The only thing of use she had told him so far was to escape the castle. He went towards the main streets, broad enough to have an inn standing right in the middle of it and still not block the stream of people wandering about with their business.

When he came back to the stream of people, everything suddenly slowed down.

People were walking slower. And slower.

They stopped. They stood completely still, as if they had become statues.

But Vandheer was still moving. He turned around, watching each and every man, woman, child around him. He examined every detail.

Something was moving his way. He didn’t know what, but he knew it was coming towards him, swiftly. He avoided it, but his movements were slowed down.

And then everything went back to normal. As it flew by, Vandheer only barely managed to avoid the arrow. It caught some of his hair, and stuck itself in a person behind him. The shrill cry of pain didn’t catch his attention. He just looked towards where the arrow was supposed to have come from. There was no bow to be seen, only the masses of people, turning their heads towards the woman who had been hit by the arrow instead of him.

He closed his eyes. He had to find the archer.

He breathed deeply, and slowly. As he let go of his breath, he opened his eyes. Instead of seeing anything that would otherwise have caught his attention, there was white smoke in the air, hanging at the height of his chest. The smoke made a track. Vandheer decided to follow it; he hoped it led to the old woman. The archer could wait. As if the white smoke decayed over time, he noticed that it grew thicker as he followed it.

The alleys and smaller streets devoid of clear daylight eventually showed him the path to a single, big building. The smoke did not come in contact with the door; it stopped right in front of it.

Vandheer had no thoughts of what he would do once he found the archer. But still, he had to know why the smoke had appeared when he had used his eyes. He closed them, breathed normally for a few moments, and opened his eyes again. The smoke was gone.

He knocked gently on the door, three times, as he always did.

‘The door is open, child.’

It was the voice. It was the old woman who had told him to escape the castle. Did she have some ability connected to him? Surely she was the one who had given him that trail.

The entrance was actually right outside a living room, or, a waiting room, for guests to await a host of some sort. Chairs and couches were placed close to the walls, and to Vandheer’s surprise, this building wasn’t small at all. An entire family could probably fit well into this place, if the size of a waiting room told much.

Contrary to his expectation, a young girl came into the waiting room. Her hair was tied at the back of her head and fell down to her shoulder blades. For a wonder, she had grey eyes *and* hair. It looked somewhat more like silver though. Her skin was bright, but not pale. Like most girls her age, she was pretty.

She seemed shy. With his looks, Vandheer was surprised she didn’t have that stare some of the citizens outside had given him. He decided to sit down on one of the more comfortable chairs.

The waiting room was not decorated, really. There was a table in the middle of the three couches, a few pots and plants, but nothing worth noticing. There were open doors at each side of the room, except for the simple, wooden entry door.

‘Would you like some tea, dear? I fear the journey and your trip around the city might have exhausted you.’

‘Thank you, but no.’

The old woman came from the door to the right, holding a plate with a teapot and one cup. Her skin was dark – she was most certainly from the Southlands. Her curly grey hair and the kind smile on her face contributed to give her the appearance of the old grandmother who always had treats for her grandchildren. She put the plate on the table between the three couches.

‘Come, child, there is no need to be humble in my house,’ she said.

Vandheer moved over to the couches. The girl followed the old lady, and sat down on the couch left to Vandheer’s. The old lady sat in his opposite direction, filling her cup of tea. And then she sipped at it.

‘Are you sure? It is from my very own birthplace. Not that powerful, bitter stuff, but mild, no matter how long I cook the leaves.’ Vandheer shook his head.

As the old lady drank her tea, Vandheer waited. But for what, he had no idea. He eventually decided to start the conversation himself.

‘Who shot that arrow?’

‘Arrow, dear? If anyone shot an arrow at you, I’d say that person is either untrained, which is most unlikely, or, that the person was just very misinformed.’

‘An innocent lady was hit.’

‘If civilians are not a concern for your archer, dear, I think it is safe to say that you have bad business going around you.’

‘… Is there nothing you can tell me about the archer?’

‘I wish I could tell you something I am sure about, dear, but I have my limits as well.’

‘Your limits are beyond that of normal.’

‘True, although that *is* stating the obvious.’

A moment of silence crashed in. Vandheer had to think about something to ask. The little girl did not distract him, although he did occasionally look at her. She seemed to be fascinated with his black hair and red eyes.

‘Why are you helping me?’

‘Now that, dear, is an interesting question. Before I answer, I’d like to know how you came here.’

‘You know it yourself.’

‘Really?’

‘You were the one who made that smoke.’

‘I am sorry, dear, but I truly cannot remember any such thing. And mind you, my memory hasn’t failed me once in my recent years.’

‘But how…’

‘Child, how was the darkness?’

Vandheer’s eyelids uncovered his eyes immediately. He couldn’t help staring at the old lady.

‘Who are you?’

‘My, do young people forget how introductions are made?’

Vandheer was stunned. He felt a slight resignation settle in. Caught off guard by the simplest principle of politeness. He had to get a grip on himself.

‘I thought you already knew who I am.’

‘Your name isn’t painted on your forehead, dear.’

‘… Vandheer Nillis.’

‘So it is.’

‘You already knew my name!’

‘I never said I didn’t,’ she answered, chuckling at Vandheer’s statement. She took another sip of her tea, and refilled it.

‘Now it is my turn. I am Bertha Maires, a rather fortunate old woman whom little is known of, luckily. As you can see, I am taking care of the little child here. Esmeralda is quite the shy girl, but she hasn’t met many others at her age. She came to me while I was shopping, or rather; she was looking at the apples I had bought. She followed me to my door, just as well as you did. And for your upcoming question, dear, she is not related to you or your family. That much I can tell, despite her looks. Maybe she is a distant cousin of yours, but who am I to speak about such matters?’

‘Well… you seem to know much. Old ladies don’t know such things, do they?’

‘Oh, well said, dear! As far as I know, most old women have little to do, thinking about their past, and just waiting for something. The patience to wait for death is a most human thing. The thought of death has not scared my own friends at all. Some of them claim that at some point, you simply live, nothing else. They don’t even mention any reason for living. Personally, I like to believe that the world has nothing more to offer to us. Of course, we could try to make something ourselves, but it is a bit late for people like me. When the time comes, everyone realizes this. Even men.

‘Oh, look at me, blabbering about something completely useless, just like some other elderly woman. Now, dear, you wish to know more about me, don’t you?’

‘Well…’

‘I know what you are talking about, dear. And call me Bertha, if you have anything you wish to say. Now, what do you want to know, for starters?’

‘Just… who *are* you?’

She put her cup in between her hands, sipping at it occasionally.

‘Well, for one thing, I can tell you that I am of the Anzareth.’

# Glimpse

Vandheer was having difficulties to not stare at her. Bertha didn’t seem to have any problem with that, though.

‘And, I am not an Artiphex. I have only been in touch with one, but it was a *very* brief meeting. All I got was a paper, not even a name! Oh, and, if I begin talking about other things, dear, don’t be afraid to remind me. Now, I am not your average old woman, I have powers, just like you, as you know by now. I wouldn’t even be surprised if you and Esmeralda are both capable of tracking down someone like me. But I am afraid that is all I have, child. I can talk to people from long distances, but I’ve never attempted at anything longer than, say, five days’ travel, at a steady pace.’

‘Well…’

‘Please, don’t tell me about your own. I would most likely not have much use of knowing them, and I believe your powers are frightening enough. After all, there is a reason the Artiphex Nexus was formed.’

‘So…’

‘Now, child, do you know what an Anzareth truly is?’

Vandheer paused to think. Images of the past flickered, facts and thoughts highlighted by his mind. All the people he once knew – now gone, and he was alone in another world now. But the question remained unanswered in his mind. He didn’t know any answer. He simply recognized those of the Anzareth.

‘Not really.’

‘I cannot say I’m surprised, dear. The bond between the Nexus and the Anzareth, or rather, the Anzareth that have always accompanied the Nexus, is quite unclear to the majority. Civilians know little of us, both of you Artiphex and us Anzareth, although it is a duty among us to also keep our advantages secret from the public eyes. Once, a group of Anzareth was discovered from their secrecy in some city, and they were literally burned in the middle of the city. The citizens even burned anything they suspected was touched by those pitiful souls. Fear makes people do the craziest things, don’t you think?’

‘It really does.’

She paused her talking. She refilled her cup once she drank it empty.

‘Well, dear, you are quite silent. Why is that?’

‘My home… it’s gone.’

‘How horrible,’ she exclaimed.

‘It was a month ago.’

‘Tell me what happened, dear. It often helps, and I may be able to tell you something more.’

As Vandheer explained what had happened, his memory flashed back in time. It had been in the middle of the night, the crescent moon shining down upon them. The village, or rather, town, was placed in the middle of the Black Mountains, with no neighbors other than themselves. The first arrows had come from the shadows, invisible with their killing prowess. But they had come only when the first invaders had spread throughout half the town. Houses were set on fire; children were running, or trapped within their houses, fear striking their young hearts, numbing their minds. The adults did what they could to resist the invasion; deflected the arrows with air, barred different paths against the invaders, but there was nothing they could do to strike back. Sending fire in any direction would have resulted in further destruction; bringing forth a flow of water would leave ruins, and ruining the ground would cause problems for the future. Too much wind would only end up in chaos, and spread the flames. There had been nothing anyone could do except for flee. Worst of all, there had been too many of them.

At the end of it, when those who tried to escape had realized that they were surrounded, they had been pinned down. The invaders were heartless in their actions.

While all of the remaining Anzareth in the village were killed, Vandheer and the Nexus had already fled with those they could bring with them – and those were few.

*Like everyone else, Fallon was panting. The sheer horror of what was happening was what made everyone’s breathing hasty; even Vandheer’s. The sword that hung on Fallon’s hip was gleaming in the darkness, the forest blocking the view towards the village.*

*‘Where are they?’*

*‘They know where we are, and they’re coming. We’ll have to set up defenses along a safe path,’ Effram said.*

*‘Right. Everyone, gather over there!’*

*Vandheer was about to move over to where the rest of the Nexus were moving, until Fallon stopped him from moving towards the rest of them.*

*‘Vandheer, do you know why you’ve always been special?’*

*‘I’m an Artiphex.’*

*‘Well, thing is, that you are even special among the Artiphex, Vandheer. And we can’t let you stay here.’*

*Despite what should have made him protest about the coming words, what should have made him want to stay with his fellow Artiphex, those feelings never came. It was just an emotionless understanding of what was to happen, that came to his mind. Even worse, Fallon had been like an elder sister to him.*

*‘We always have a plan for any situation, and this is the one we hoped the most to never encounter. Most of us will cover your escape, while the six most powerful of us will plow a path for you to escape, and if possible, they will also accompany you. We have no time to waste, do you understand?’*

*Vandheer’s mouth didn’t want to move. He nodded instead.*

*The feeling of loneliness had already settled in by the time Vandheer and the six others were escaping. The fierce cries of his fellow Artiphex, using their powers solely for the purpose of covering his escape, could be heard far away. Occasionally, they encountered the invaders, but the six who escorted Vandheer had easily put them to eternal silence, but that just wasn’t enough. Arrows came from more and more directions, the further they came, even though every nearby enemy was stricken down. One after another, they fell, urging Vandheer and the others to keep going, despite their pain, their final efforts to distract or hinder the enemy.*

*By the time Vandheer had thought it was safe, Effram, the last of those who had escorted him, got hit in the leg by an arrow. Nearby soldiers came from all directions, and both he and Vandheer knew what he was going to do. What he had to do.*

*‘Vandheer, when I’m gone, know this: I will be meeting with the others, but where I do not know. Not that it really matters, of course, hehe.’*

*Vandheer had only looked away while Effram had chuckled in his last moments.*

*‘Lad, look at me.’*

*He had obeyed. He was on the verge of tears, and yet they didn’t come out.*

*‘When you come, I don’t want to see you like this. I want to see a man. I want to see one who can make anyone laugh, so that we will have a good time together by the time you arrive. Fallon likes such men too, you know?’*

*Effram had held up his hand before he would do his last stand. Vandheer held the big man’s hand with his own. He knew there was something he was supposed to feel at this time. Yet, he didn’t feel it. All he felt, was the slight heat of the blue fires that covered Effram’s entire body.*

*‘Don’t hesitate, lad. Just do what you have to, and everything will be fine. I know you will do well. And remember, Vandeer – we are never alone.’*

*Vandheer couldn’t believe the bloody fool was smiling.*

*And then there was light. The darkness suddenly lit up, the blue flames of Effram’s last powers consuming everyone not close to him.*

*It also cost him his life.*

*Major parts of the forest were lit up by blue flames. Screams of endless, well-deserved pain consumed the forest, the same way Effram’s flames consumed it. Vandheer knew what had happened. And he would remember it.*

As he told the rest of what had recently happened, Bertha had filled her cup only once more.

‘… Now that is quite the story. You don’t have any idea what your duty is, do you?’

‘Honestly, no.’

Bertha put her cup on the table, deep in thoughts.

‘Well, I can help you, dear, but really, there is only one thing I would recommend, and it won’t be easy. To make things less easy – or worse, make a pick – I cannot help you personally. Not only do I have little Esmeralda here to take care of, but my body cannot carry me on such a journey as you must venture.’

‘And that is?’

‘Well, child, considering the most widespread maps that depict our world, we are in the far west. There is someone I have heard of, who is apparently someone like you – an Artiphex, but one who is not and has never been part of the Nexus. This Artiphex is not one of the worse kinds either. Rumors say she is, well, a local… fortune-teller, of sorts. The rumors even say that she is correct all the time. I am aware of the dangers of trusting mere hearsay, but it is the only hope I can offer you, dear. What is your choice?’

Vandheer looked into the teacup he had not noticed before now. He picked it up, and tried to look for any reflections in the still hot water. Maybe Bertha could also keep tea warm.

‘Can you help me prepare?’

‘Of course, dear. Young spirits such as you are invigorating to old women like me.’

The next morning, after a night with little sleep and staring at the ceiling, Vandheer got completely woken up by some tea Bertha had made. She had made stew for breakfast, bless the old woman, and now was the time.

He stood right in front of the door, facing Bertha who stood in the opposite direction. She had given him a black robe and a sandy brown cloak. Apparently, it was made to *look* like an old, worn cloak, but it never got worn out. If it was true, she had used it for decades. Vandheer was unsure on how he was supposed to feel about it, but he was grateful nonetheless. She had also given him sandals, although he would have to switch them for boots later, but even that could wait. For some reason, she also had white shirts she had never used. ‘Always prepare for the future’, she had said.

Vandheer wondered just who he referred to in his mind, when he had thought “she”. He decided to put that thought aside.

‘I’m sorry that we didn’t get to know each other, dear, but I have hope that we will meet again. Now…’

She fished something out of her pockets, and put it into Vandheer’s right hand. It was something small. She looked into his eyes as he spoke, solemnity clear in her voice.

‘Don’t open it until you are well out of sight from the city. We don’t want to make a commotion.’

‘I won’t. Thank you.’

And with that, Vandheer was on his way. The horse Bertha had given to him was quite fine with him. The gelding was named Breeze, and it was a tall one, with brown mane and tail. Vandheer hadn’t quite often rode horses, but he was used to it. The saddlebags were not full, but he had what he needed. Vandheer found his way back to the main roads of the city, packed with dirt so hard even the pouring rain wouldn’t make mud of the streets.

The rain didn’t really bother him anyway. It did not touch him. Or the horse. Or the saddlebags.

The main street was pretty much empty of people, but some were still buying things under wooden ceilings. The age varied.

The city walls were guarded, and to his expectation, he was stopped.

‘Halt!’

Vandheer obeyed, jumped off Breeze, and stood still right in front of them. Three guards, in light armor and swords at their hips, looked at him. The one in front of him carried a set of knives as well. Probably some mercenary. He looked at Vandheer from every direction before approaching him.

‘Is there a problem?’ Vandheer asked.

‘Yes. Why are you outside when it is raining?’

‘I am a traveler, and I must go. I have affairs to attend to.’

Vandheer went back to the horse, but the guard put his hand on Vandheer’s shoulder.

‘What affairs?’

‘Affairs that you don’t need to know.’

Vandheer climbed up on Breeze. It was only when he heard metal ringing and shouts that he was certain they were not intent on letting anyone past.

They knew what had happened – they knew of the darkness that had surrounded him at the castle. He kicked the gelding in its sides. Breeze galloped past the guards faster than his name implied.

Shouting behind him in the heavy rain, Vandheer knew what they were going to do. Their arrows were their only chance to stop him. He pulled the reins, and turned around to look at the guards standing atop the city walls.

He opened his eyes wider. And then he saw the arrows. He didn’t react to them.

The arrows stopped in midair. He turned Breeze around, and rode east.

As the day went on, the rain occasionally stopped and came back in small drizzles. The heavy part of it was over, and by sunset, the sky was clear. He had seen no villages or towns yet, but he found a little collection of trees, at the very least.

He sat down in front of a tree, leaning on the trunk. He had already dried the area around the tree, and he had not bothered tying Breeze’s reins to the tree. Neither of them could see any population in their sight, and besides, he figured it wanted some company. Vandheer had scratched behind Breeze’s ears frequently, and decided to do so before he went to sleep.

Out of principles, he would have done nothing to this collection of trees – it was just too small. But since he was in a hurry, and needed cover for the night, he had no doubts that the horse probably wanted some sleep too. Nonetheless, Vandheer intended to make the horse trust him. Back home, they had claimed that horses would trust those who treated them well. Bertha had seemed to be a kind woman – she probably treated her gelding the same way.

He drew a deep breath. Let it out. And drew another one. And repeated.

Vandheer directed his gaze at the branches of the other trees. It might have looked like an invisible giant was breaking them, the same way a child could break small twigs. The branches came to his direction. The leaves got stripped off the thinner branches. The thicker ones got split through the middle, hovering in the air, arranging each other to make support for a wooden ceiling covered with leaves.

And there it was – his cover for the night. It was tall enough for the gelding to rest under, too.

Vandheer put the rest of the boughs and leaves a little bit in front of the wooden ceiling. And then, fires emerged from nowhere, setting the pile of wood and leaves on fire, and lit up the darkness. Vandheer unsaddled Breeze when he came under the ceiling.

As he sat down on the dry ground, fire in front of him and saddlebags leaning on the supports, Vandheer fished out the thing Bertha had given him. It was covered in a piece of cloth.

The moment he uncovered the small object, daylight beamed from it, blinding him completely, despite the fire.

He quickly put his other hand in front of his eyes. Such light! Even the horse turned away from it.

Vandheer quickly covered the object, but only with one layer. The light still shone through it; it appeared to be some sort of shining stone, a crystal of some sort. He had never seen anything like it. He decided to leave it for now and look at it in the morning.

He pulled out the blanket Bertha had packed into the saddlebag, along with the large piece of cloth she had insisted he use so that he wouldn’t have to get dirt stains while sleeping. He had no worries considering stains, but it would make sleeping on the ground a bit comfortable, at least.

As he lied down on the ground on his left side, he stared at the fire. The crackling sounds of burning wood were somewhat calming. The unforeseeable movements of the flame were mesmerizing; they emptied his thoughts completely.

The flames began moving slower. Vandheer moved his right arm towards the heat.

The fire came closer. And then, he held it in his hand.

Vandheer pulled his hand out of the fire as the heat seared his hand. He remembered the last time he had lost control. It had been many years ago; nothing too serious, but he had lost all feeling in his left hand while the snow melted around his fingers, and then froze to ice again.

He held his right hand in front of him, looking for any serious burns. There were a couple of marks. They would be completely healed by morning.

Taking no risk, Vandheer let the flame whither, the occasional dancing flares popping up a few short moments. He closed his eyes, and sought the feeling of complete relaxation in every fiber of his body. Eventually it came, invading his mind with emptiness and sleep.

He had traveled for five days now. He had managed to find cover for the night and catch a few rabbits without any problems whatsoever, but he did wonder when he would finally reach the city gates.

Vandheer had seen the city since he scaled a small hill. He knew that the city was distant, across the huge, flat lands, with the occasional collection of trees. He could have sworn he should have been in the city by now.

He hadn’t ridden Breeze considerably hard, but he had made him trot a few times, then gone at a calm pace and given them both a small treat. For himself, it was mostly a sip of water and a mouthful of dried meat.

*Dear me, Vandheer, have you still not reached Derenthil?*

*‘*You *can* talk to me from five days’ travel then?’

*Vandheer, please avoid stating the obvious. I’ve had enough of it from gossiping old women who don’t even know they are speaking the truth. Now, are you close to Derenthil?*

‘I’ve seen it since I scaled a small hill two days ago.’

*Then you should be a few hours away now. It doesn’t look like you get any closer, does it?*

‘No.’

*It is merely a means of protection. It is magic.*

Vandheer blinked at the echo in his head.

‘So, the–’

*Don’t jump to conclusions, dear, and don’t get your hopes up! There are some of us who wouldn’t help you as eagerly as I have, and be careful with where you place your trust! Who knows, that fortune-teller might even set you up to believe her, while all she foretells is not worth knowing. Now, have you passed the last groups of trees?*

‘It won’t be long until I’m past.’

*Well, once you are, I’m afraid you will be in an exposed area. A magical circle around Derenthil ensures that nothing grows taller than the height of a small cottage, so that the guards can see anything from a distance, and know this: that fortune-teller can probably sense you by using that magical circle.*

‘What else do I need to know?’

*That I’m having difficulties talking to you right now. I fear this is the end of our conversation, and my ability’s range. May fate be on your side, Vandheer!*

And with that, there was no longer any voice inside of Vandheer’s head. He waited, just in case Bertha’s voice might return. It didn’t.

‘*Ayerae, ki!*’

He kicked Breeze in his sides, and who went off into a gallop. The city wasn’t far away, and if what Bertha had said was correct, he was already known of. He wouldn’t be surprised if the fortune-teller was an acquaintance of the city rulers.

As if he was looking through a shifting lens, the city walls stretched out as if he was in a dream. Blurred, grey blocks became a large wall towering above him. It was only now that he saw the eight towers that surrounded the harbor town, stationed at each end of a wall. The large barrier, blocks of wood reinforced with steel bars, stood shut in front of him.

On top of the great walls, several guards looked down on him. They were all lightly armored, spears at hand and quivers on their backs. They also had bows hanging from their hips. At the two towers on the northern entry, from which he had come from, he could barely see the silhouettes of two guards on top, due to the sun.

‘I seek entry into the city of Derenthil!’ he shouted.

The barrier split into two doors, opening up slowly and evenly. Two men came through as the doors got shut, both armed with swords at their hips. Vandheer moved Breeze slowly to them, and jumped off to the ground. He wiped the dust off his traveling cloak.

As the two men came closer, they began circling him. They looked at him from every angle, at him. He could feel their stares, looking for something out of place.

He noticed the guards were holding bows in hand.

‘I seek entry into the city of Derenthil,’ Vandheer repeated.

‘So you do. And where do you come from, stranger?’ the man behind Vandheer said.

‘North.’

‘North… the kingdom of Elzraei?’

‘Beyond that.’

‘Ah… south of the Black Mountains, then?’

‘… Yes.’

‘And for what reason do you think that I should allow you, man from the south of the Black Mountains, to gain entry to the city of Derenthil?’ the man in front of Vandheer said. He said it word by word, slowly and clearly. Vandheer knew he had made sure the guards on top of the walls had heard.

‘I need to see the fortune-teller. I was told by my aunt that there was one here.’

‘So, your aunt told you there *was* one here. And you believe this, fortune-teller, is still here, within these walls?’

‘Yes…’

The silence was disturbed only by a calm wind.

‘And what do you wish, or need, to know?’

‘That is for the fortune-teller to learn.’

‘And so she shall!’

Suddenly, all of the guards burst with laughter. Vandheer was confused, and somewhat dumbfounded.

‘I’m sorry, Master…?’

‘Erial,’ Vandheer replied. He had no intention of letting anyone know his identity.

‘Oh, I’m terribly sorry Master Erial, but me and my men haven’t seen as much as a flock of birds come towards the city. Haven’t even had any visitors to scare, and we simply couldn’t resist the urge when we spotted you galloping towards us. Anyway, come in, welcome to the city of Derenthil. Enjoy yourself.’

Vandheer had been walking in the city for about an hour now, unable to find the fortune-teller. He decided to visit an inn, and stopped by *The White Rose*.

As soon as he entered, laughter boomed in his ears. The stir from outside was inaudible, and the cheery sounds of drinking men was all to be heard, along with the clanking of mugs of ale. Those who were drunk were slumped where they sat, in the corners of the saloon. Vandheer went to one of the waitresses, and talked quietly. She had an apron and her hair tied up in a bun, and like most other women he had seen so far, she had brown hair. She was a about a head smaller than him.

‘Where can I find the local fortune-teller?’

She didn’t answer. Instead, she was gaping, staring at his hair, and then his eyes.

‘Where does she live?’

‘Oh, uh, just go to the main road, and when you see the end of the market, go to the right.’

‘Which direction should I go on the main road?’

‘South.’

‘Thank you.’

He exited the inn immediately.

The stench of drunkenness had infested the place. He went to the stables right next to the inn, gave the man there a coin and left Breeze to rest for the rest of the day. Vandheer told the stable boy to occasionally scratch Breeze behind the ears.

The many alleyways and small streets seemed to be everywhere, as if the buildings wanted to occupy as much space as possible. Tall, grey buildings of stone and others made of wood – some even seemed to be cut out from a single, big block of stone. Children were chasing each other, and when they got lost, they gave a shout, and continued their game of cat and mouse. The hard dirt had been walked on for decades, perhaps centuries.

And then, after only a few steps, he was off the alleyways and on the paved, main street, which was filled with crowds of people. Merchants from all kinds of places were advertising their products, from cheap fruits, vegetables and meat to clothes and fabrics of wool or silk to treasures that brought good luck and fortune, however untrue their claims might have been. He did notice that the more honest ones were attracting more customers, and he could hear that some were regulars.

All kinds of people were gathered at the market – from the elderly to children only a few years old. Mostly middle-aged and young people walked the larger and wider streets, but children were found everywhere, often accompanying their parents or their grandparents.

The main street kept going on the exact same way. Beyond the market, Vandheer saw a castle, placed on top of a hill. He was certain the city council lived there, as Bertha had told him that Derenthil was not ruled by any nation.

By the time he reached the southern end of the market, Vandheer’s stomach had begun complaining a bit. It wasn’t growling yet, but he felt it. He hadn’t eaten much the last few days, but intended to stock up while he was in the city.

He turned right, and kept on walking on a smaller street. A horse carriage could fit in, but no more. The stone block buildings were about three floors tall, many of which had ropes hanging from small balconies, where washed clothes were hung to dry.

And then he saw it. At the end of the street, there was a lone house, right in the middle of a patch of bushes and grass, where hardened dirt and pavement would otherwise have occupied that space. It had two floors and an attic, four large, non-diffusing windows, two at each level. It was dark inside the stone house in spite of the windows and the sunlight, and as many other buildings, it seemed to be made out of a single block of stone. A chimney rose out of the top, which was black as night. Vandheer wondered why the fortune-teller would light the fireplace at this time of the day.

He knocked on the wooden door, which was ornamented with an eye. Quite fitting for a fortune-teller.

Slowly, the door opened. He was welcomed by darkness and silence. Unconsciously, he took a step back. He decided to enter the house anyway – a fortune-teller couldn’t be dangerous. However, it was only now that he noticed the lack of any door handles on either sides of it.

To his fortune, there was a lantern right in front of the door. He picked it up and looked at the oil inside of it. It began burning. The weak, purple light coming from it slowly became red.

The sound of footsteps killed the silence.

‘Ah. A new client. And who might you be?’

As if someone removed a dark blanket over everything, light was everywhere. He dropped the lantern, which dimmed immediately.

The woman who appeared out of the shadows was stunningly remarkable. She was maybe five years older than Vandheer, but she was by far the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. She was dressed lightly, in dark clothes – which looked like silk, but he wasn’t sure – that changed color depending on which direction one looked at them. One moment a part of her dress was black, the other it was red, or even purple. Her shoulders were slender, as were the rest of her body. She was about as tall as Vandheer, maybe smaller by the length of a finger, and her nose was as straight as her back. Her eyebrows were dark, a bit thin, and her eyelashes were quite visible, but just as black as her clothes.

As she walked past him, he saw her hair. It was darker than night, dipped into the very essence of darkness itself. It was tied at her neck, with a couple of hairs untied, but still together in small bunches. No strand of hair was left alone.

Her slender shape was incredible, with no unnecessary exaggerations. Oh, and those legs.

‘Come.’

He was still standing by the door – which had somehow closed on its own. He couldn’t help it. The woman had appeared out of thin air to his right, and the only things there were, were shoes and clothes for walking outside. To his eye, it didn’t look like the woman ever went out. How he had not noticed her made him cautious.

Nonetheless, Vandheer followed her to the left. The house wasn’t large, but there was plenty of space for just one person. They turned right, and he stopped. The woman went over to the other side of the room, where there was a low table, which she lied behind. The floor was covered with pillows and blankets, making the floor uneven everywhere except for where the woman was resting. A fireplace lit the room from the left. She pushed the table away, clearing the space between her and Vandheer. And there they were – Vandheer sitting on a pillow with his legs crossed, with the woman resting her head on her hand while lying on a blanket on the floor.

He waited. He looked into the woman’s eyes. She seemed to know something, with that tint in her eyes. He was certain they were purple. Or maybe her eyes changed colors as well.

She smiled. And then she giggled, and suddenly, she erupted into seemingly senseless laughter.

‘You really don’t have any idea who I am, do you, boy?’

‘Not the slightest clue,’ Vandheer said.

‘But you have heard of me from someone.’

‘True.’

‘And who might that be then? Your aunt, perhaps?’

Vandheer blinked. He regretted that he had.

‘A friend, or an acquaintance, whatever suits your impression.’

‘You certainly know how to handle that tongue of yours.’

‘I also know that you can tell me something.’

‘Men always want to know where treasure is to be found. Too bad you can hardly…’

‘You know who I am.’

‘Well… yes, I know who you are. A foolhardy youth, proud as a peacock, brimming with the brashness of fools, and yet wise enough to be seeking counsel.’

Vandheer was trained in the art of patience. In fact, almost too patient for his own good. He had been commended and criticized for it.

‘I am the last member of the Artiphex Nexus. Our secrets and tools have been taken, or will be in due time, and I need to know what it means!’ In his anger, he had placed his fist on the table.

‘… Anger is not appealing, boy. But I forgive you, since I did take part in infuriating you. But I don’t know much else about you, nor do you.’

‘What I don’t know about myself isn’t worth knowing.’

‘That, is where you are wrong, and what you need to know.’

Vandheer blinked. Twice. The fortuneteller gazed at the flames dancing in the fireplace while she spoke. He could have sworn that the fire was actually in her eyes, and not just reflected.

‘Your childhood… it is fuller of secrets than anyone else’s, and more things are left to darkness than I’ve ever seen. Normally I’d see your life like a series of scenes, where I could stand as a spectator, but this… is just worse than darkness. But what I can see though, are most certainly not good omens.’

Vandheer was certain about what she referred to. It had to be that night, the last time the Artiphex Nexus were gathered.

‘Other than that, someone does not want anyone to know your past, and made quite sure it won’t be easy. You are brimming over with magic…’

‘I was raised in a town *of* magic.’

‘What you have is not magic. It can’t be.’

‘Then what is it?’ Vandheer inquired.

‘How can I know? It most certainly is something magical, even if it doesn’t work in the same way. There’s no other explanation.’

‘Then let me ask you something – how do *your* powers work?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’

On second thought, it was.

‘You read your clients’ pasts like open books?’ That wasn’t actually a question.

‘Or images, as I already implied.’

Vandheer held his hands in front of his eyes. He sighed.

‘… And my past is hidden because of my kind of magic.’

‘That doesn’t prevent me from seeing what person you are.’

‘You’ve already told me that.’

‘That was merely foreplay, I wasn’t being serious.’

‘Foreplay? You think this is a game?’

‘You have no idea how few people are interested in information these days.’

‘I’m here!’

‘Every man and woman needs to have a little fun once in a while. Otherwise I wouldn’t be doing this.’

Vandheer had no clue whether she was referring to her work or her “foreplay”.

‘... But really, who are you, boy?’

Vandheer looked up. She couldn’t tell who he was. Was his very name hidden to her sight? Her purple eyes were deeply concentrated on his.

‘You don’t know my name?’

‘Of course I don’t.’

‘Is it because of the magic?’ Vandheer asked.

‘Who knows? I always know my clients before they get to the introduction, down to the bone. I know their secrets, habits, personality, thoughts, feelings, desires, intents – nothing is hidden to me... but all I know about you, however, is what I don’t know.’

‘What about your omens?’

‘When someone wants to keep secrets through other means than ignorance, my feelings are only good enough for distinguishing between goods and evils. I don’t expect you to tell me anything you might know, but I am well aware of this: you are just a part of something far greater.’

‘So what’s happening?’

‘You already said so.’

Suddenly, time seemed to warp out of proportion. Her lips moved, but the sound echoed, strengthened and weakened at the same time. He could only hear an echo in his thoughts. It didn’t even sound like his own.

*The secrets and tools of the Artiphex Nexus are to be brought into the light.*

And then he felt a hand grab his shoulder.

‘… will not repeat myself one more time. Who are you?!’

‘He’s just a client!’

‘You haven’t had any clients for months! Why should they suddenly return and with *his* looks?’

Vandheer grabbed the man’s wrist and stood up on the floor.

Slowly, the man’s veins became darker, black steam rising from his hand. The man backed off immediately, screaming, and ran for the door. He shut it loudly.

‘Just why didn’t you answer him?’ The fortune-teller asked brashly.

‘I... I don’t know.’ She sighed in resignation.

‘Well. What was that black residue then?’

‘You saw it?’ Vandheer asked. He was having difficulties grasping how a fortune-teller could have seen the residue.

‘Of course I did. I know it was not magic.’

Vandheer blinked.

*Not magic?*

‘Well, you should be on your way. I doubt that soldier will leave either of us alone.’

‘You’re right. Although… ’

Vandheer was about to get up on his feet, but then he looked at his left hand. The fortune-teller held both her hands around his. Her nails were long and painted violet.

‘Before you go, there is something you should know, seeing as you’re not from around here.’

Vandheer sat down again.

‘I’m not telling you this because I want you to come back, although it would be nice of you to do so,’ she said, smiling. The smile was quickly replaced by a solemn atmosphere, her face expressionless.

‘The way things go about has changed. Kings have become rumored, and the fall and rise of new houses has swept the lands like wildfire. The High Rule itself is threatened.’

‘The High Rule?’

‘Its members and representatives are even common topics for gossiping nowadays. Taverns and inns are filled with chatter about them, but even worse, things are happening around them. Deaths on the street without any clear cause, buildings falling apart in the middle of the night, children and women missing without any trace. Men who have lost all their fingers while in streets brimming with sunlight. Or so the rumors go, but it is clear that outside this city, there is a spreading taint. It is only a matter of time until Derenthil also becomes tainted with this… wickedness.’

‘What will you do?’

‘I will follow you, if possible, and…’

Vandheer didn’t hear the rest of it. More precisely, he didn’t listen to her, but he could hear her voice. It was because of two reasons. First of all, he refused to let her follow him. Second, he was hearing things he could have sworn he shouldn’t have heard around a fortuneteller’s house.

He heard whispers. Creaking. Something was stepped on, no, placed somewhere close. Water? Some splashing. A smell. Smoke. Fire. They were already here. So fast. He grabbed the fortune-teller’s arms, pulled her up on her legs and dragged her towards the door.

‘What are you doing?’ she yelled.

‘They are burning the building.’

‘Not possible. It’s made of stone.’

‘They aren’t using wood, woman.’

Just as they were speaking, Vandheer heard glass break. He didn’t even need to look around to know that the house was already burning. The light from the small gaps in the walls was vicious, and he could already feel the heat on his back. He kicked the door open. The only thing that met him was fire. The searing heat hit him, and before he even knew it, he was set on fire as well.

He closed his eyes. The heat faded slowly. When he opened his eyes, there were no flames close to him. Instead, all he saw was five men at the edge of the once green field, which had already become ashen.

Three spears, two swords. Knives at every hip. Leather and polished armor. Four wore of them wore helmets. The last one, in the middle, had his sword sheathed.

Vandheer could see the panic in the soldiers, having seen a man on fire douse himself with nothing. Only the officer managed to keep himself composed. Vandheer let go of the fortune-teller’s hand. He knew that all the flames were gone. He listened to his own footsteps, the fortune-teller’s breathing and the clattering of the soldiers’ armor.

The officer held up a rolled parchment, which he unrolled swiftly.

‘Erial… a traveler whose affairs supposedly only include the visit to a *fortune-teller*, yet he kills a man by blackening his hand completely… a curse which kills the victim within the hour, perhaps even by the minute.’

The ripped the parchment into pieces and unsheathed his sword. He pointed the it at Vandheer as he spoke.

‘Not to mention a soldier of our fair city. Do you have anything to say in your defense, Erial?’

Vandheer closed his eyes. Inhale. Exhale. Deep breaths. His eyes felt a bit wet.

‘… to pronounce an Artiphex guilty of a crime is not what I’d do, boys,’ the fortune-teller said.

He could *feel* the air. So full of panic. Dread. *Fear*. And at the same time, anger, hatred, bloodthirstiness. Vandheer almost shared the anticipation. He opened his eyes.

‘Kill him!’

The spears came directly to him, the swords were held in the air.

Vandheer began moving. As he moved, it seemed like the soldiers moved slower. He stepped to the furthermost left, grabbed the long spear handle and broke the spearhead off. He grabbed the soldier’s arm and twisted the forearm so that the elbow had to fall loose from the rest of the arm. Vandheer proceeded smoothly to the soldier to his right, whom he was already prepared to deal with. He unsheathed the soldier’s knife with his back to the man and cut the man’s throat as he turned around, pushing the man down with his free hand with a firm hold on the man’s face. The bleeding soldier was already nose deep in the ashes. As a sword came crashing down on the ground right next to Vandheer, he broke the next soldier’s wrist by grabbing his forearm and twisting the hand sideways, loosening the soldier’s grip on the sword completely. Vandheer grabbed the sword as it fell slowly, and proceeded to cut the man’s entire forearm off while he danced past the last soldier’s spear while spinning around one fine circle on one foot, ashes whirling around him. He rammed the flat side of the blade into the last soldier’s ringing helmet, and stabbed the sword into the man’s back as if he were a pedestal. He let go of the sword, and turned to face the officer. All of the soldiers were behind him.

Time went back to normal.

The officer dropped his sword out of fear. Fear was painted all over him. The stance, the shaking, the sweat. And the step backwards.

Vandheer moved swiftly to the officer, who had just turned around by the time Vandheer had a solid grip around the man’s throat. He held the choking man up in the air. The officer held onto Vandheer’s arm as if Vandheer was his last hope.

‘Please… let… me…’

‘For burning an *innocent* woman’s house…’

Vandheer tightened his grip at the word.

The black steam rose from his hand. The black marks spread from around Vandheer’s hand. The man began choking. He desperately tried to inhale, however useless it was. He was only hastening the process.

The fingers came loose, as the arms eventually did as well. Vandheer let go of the black throat. He bent down and tried to get the dead officer’s sheath loose.

‘My. I never expected one of my own kinsmen to be this… remarkable.’

Vandheer put the sword under his belt. It would have to do for now.

‘Well, I suppose you want to go, don’t you?’ she asked.

‘I have to. This place is no longer safe,’ Vandheer said. He turned around to see if the fortune-teller would need to bring anything with her, but instead, he saw her in complete shock. She was holding her hands in front of her face, but not her eyes. She had stepped back as well. She didn’t seem to be afraid though, by her eyes. Vandheer assumed it was merely an unusual surprise. If he hadn’t been sure of why she was surprised, he might have thought she had seen someone naked.

‘Your eyes…’

‘Oh.’

Vandheer wiped the blood off his face.

‘Better now?’ he asked. So many had fallen for that ruse, but he just couldn’t help grinning. Well, it wasn’t really much of a ruse either.

‘Much better. And wipe that smirk off your face. I was worried for a second.’

She went back into the blackened house. For some reason, Vandheer suddenly had company. It seemed to him like he had exchanged an obvious destination for it.

And he still didn’t know her name.

# Moonlight

They had galloped past the guards in a rush through the eastern gate. He had wanted to look for an open gate, but apparently, the fortune-teller already knew what gates were open at what times. Or perhaps she had looked into the minds of soldiers, and that way, learned when the gates were opened for traffic. He assumed it was the latter.

Vandheer deflected an arrow while they were still in range of an archer, who was standing at the top of a tower. He was impressed the archer could actually shoot that precisely, but then he had forced the arrow to swing around and seek its sender like a bird. He was unsure of whether he heard a *thump* or not, with the wind in his ears and the horses galloping.

They slowed down their horses to a trot, and when the city’s magic seemed to no longer affect them, they slowed down.

‘So, where to, boy?’ the fortune-teller asked.

‘For one thing, my name is Vandheer,’ he answered, ‘and I am not a boy.’

‘I’m Sharon, and you do look like one. Which direction?’

‘Just follow me.’

He rode to somewhere they could rest. Another bunch of trees, placed in the middle of a nowhere which consisted largely of huge patches of dirt, grass and a few concentrations of vegetation – suitable, but the sun was already setting. Sharon had used plenty of time preparing for the escape while Vandheer had made sure nobody spotted them. Instead of the dark clothes, she now wore blinding white silk, all of which hung loosely on her body.

‘So, why did you decide to visit me specifically?’ Sharon asked. She was already preparing to rest for a while, to Vandheer’s wonder. She had carried a blanket with her, and put it elegantly on the ground where the roots didn’t stick up from the ground. She sat down on it as if she was still in her home. It was only then that the similarity of the blanket made Vandheer’s mind work. It was the same as the one in her house. He had no idea she had prepared herself so swiftly in those few moments he gave her to fetch her things.

‘An Anzareth living north of Derenthil told me about you. She even went as far as calling you an Artiphex.’

‘Did she? I’m flattered.’

‘But are you one? Are you an Artiphex?’

‘Sure I am, but we are *not* of the same kind. I can assure you that.’

‘You don’t have to.’

Vandheer sat down on the blanket after pulling off his boots. He had already removed the saddlebags from both of their horses and given them some food, or rather, hay and water.

‘Do you have a second name?’ Sharon asked. Vandheer was impressed that she had taken the time to even bring fruits with her. She took one from one of the bags that she had scattered on the blanket, as she rested on the blanket, lying sideways. Vandheer signaled if he could take one. She nodded.

‘I have.’

‘Hm. I didn’t expect you to have a family name.’

‘It isn’t one.’

Sharon stopped chewing on whatever it was she had in her mouth and stared blankly at Vandheer. She went on with it after he lied down on the blanket, on his back, staring up at the sky through the leaves.

‘That’s odd. How come it isn’t?’

‘… In the Nexus, there was always at least one who could see what kinds of powers rested inside a person, and what this person would be attracted to. This one person always attended births, since early points of life are good moments for predicting a newborn’s powers, or rather, a new Artiphex’ powers. Through knowledge of previous Artiphex, we learned if this Artiphex was special even among us, or if he was like the rest, with no unique powers but with similar strength. Most were in the middle, unique and useful. Some could make plants grow faster, while others could form all kinds of things without even touching them. Our healers were wondrous – a broken arm could be completely healed in a minute. There were those of us who had powers that were almost identical to that of the Anzareth. And then there were those who… were of an entirely different league, or kind.’

‘And which kind are you of?’

Vandheer bent his back and went to sit on the blanket with his legs crossed. He looked sharply at Sharon.

‘I am of the Nillis.’

Sharon was having difficulty grasping who was sitting right in front of her. Not only was this a boy who claimed to be a wielder of *that power*, but he claimed to have the same powers and strengths as that… *man*. She decided to put the thought away… but Vandheer’s hair and red eyes didn’t allow her to. He had such mesmerizing features. His looks were made to attract attention, to bind eyes to his him.

‘Tell me one thing, Vandheer. Can you…’

Sharon felt something on her arm. There was nothing there. She looked back at Vandheer, who was looking at something.

Her eyes widened. A leaf stood completely suspended in the air above the blanket. Her head tilted without forethought, slowly against the ground where her shadow lied.

The leaf’s shadow was on her arm’s shadow.

Gripped by terror and panic, she stood up, and before she even knew it, she realized that Vandheer was holding her shadow. Or more correctly, he didn’t allow her to move.

*So this is…*

She could already feel her sweat. The fear. The sheer terror of inability, weakness, helplessness. Her strength was sapped from her legs. Her eyes searched for something dizzily, but she didn’t know what. Her blood was pumping, and she could feel it in her arms.

And then, she just fell on the blanket, in total confusion. She had stepped away from him, yet she thought she had been in his grip, frozen on the spot. She could see it on the blanket’s folds.

Had it only been the fear all along?

‘I’m sorry…’ she exclaimed.

‘Don’t apologize. I scared you with that leaf.’

‘Was I…’ Sharon asked.

‘All I did was to bind that one leaf to you,’ he responded calmly.

Sharon picked up the leaf, which had fallen on the blanket, its shadow no longer bound to any other. She erupted with laughter over the insane notion of getting scared by such a thing as *a**leaf*.

‘I can’t believe you managed to scare me with that,’ she said, wiping a tear from her eye.

He smiled. That was good. She couldn’t let him believe she was truly frightened. She was too strong for that, as her mother would have said. Even if it had been a man with a knife who had been there instead of the knife, her mother would have told her to not be afraid, but do what she had to. Sharon wasn’t sure about how to handle this one, though. As long as he wouldn’t do anything to her, she knew she would be fine. She had just overreacted.

‘So, when do we move on?’ Sharon asked.

‘Whenever you are ready. There is still some time until nightfall.’

‘Let’s go then.’

They packed up, strapped the saddlebags and went east.

‘Do you know any places where there are gatherings of Anzareth?’ Vandheer asked.

The question was sudden, but she immediately thought of several cities to the east. She didn’t remember where they were, but she knew their names. She pulled the reins, jumped off her gelding – which she had bought before they had left and was named Fire – and removed a map from one of the saddlebags. She unfolded the old piece of parchment and studied it. Vandheer came to take a look as well.

‘I remember a gathering of scholars and conjurers living in the northeast, and they live in their own society, but we would be better off riding towards this city,’ Sharon said, pointing at a name that was placed around a collection of mountains.

All of a sudden, Vandheer unsheathed the sword he had stolen from the officer.

‘They are coming.’

Sharon looked to the west. There were most certainly a couple of men riding towards them, at a high speed as well.

‘Are you going to fight them or should we escape?’

‘They won’t leave me alone…’ Vandheer answered has if he hadn’t heard her question. He walked towards the riders, who were coming closer to them, slowly but threatening. And then they came.

‘Do you think you stand a chance against an Artiphex?!’ she heard Vandheer screaming. The soldiers were hopelessly foolish – they rode into him, or rather, their own deaths.

Just as brutally as he had killed the other soldiers, he was still merciless. Dodging a spear while throwing himself to his right, he cut a horse’s leg, and from this distance, Sharon wasn’t sure if he had cut the leg *off*, which might have been the case. The poor creature’s rider fell off as the horse crashed into the ground, but he quickly came back up on his feet. Vandheer proceeded to run towards another galloping horse, and jumped *above* the rider, cutting off the soldier’s head while in a somersault.

Every single one of the soldiers came crashing to the ground, eventually, with or without their heads firmly stuck on their necks.

One of them was moving towards Sharon.

*Pathetic fools.*

Sharon grabbed the knife she kept at her thigh. It was short, but it was sufficient. As the soldier came closer, she began moving around the soldier.

She looked at the ground. The soldier was in range. She held the knife in the air, looking at its shadow, and then tossed it away from the soldier, up in the air.

The soldier grabbed his throat around a newly created wound, while the knife was stuck in the air. The man fell to the ground, dead. The knife fell to the ground shortly after. Sharon looked towards where Vandheer was, who was well into the battle, this time against better foes, but they couldn’t hold him down.

*You are not the only one, Vandheer Nillis…*

The soldiers descended from their steeds, and each one of them came towards Vandheer, circling him in. They acknowledged the fact that their steeds would only be burdens.

‘It’s going to be a pleasure to see your head on a stake, Vandheer Nillis,’ an officer said. This one was in full armor, and was putting on his helmet just now. He carried a sword, like two of every third soldier around Vandheer.

Vandheer closed his eyes, and pressed them. He was a bit surprised that they knew his name.

‘There will be blood, but none of mine.’

When he opened them, he could feel blood rushing through his veins. The excitement. The coming battle. The blood he awaited.

The rattling sounds of armor from behind ruined the surprise attack. Vandheer swung to his left, grabbed the spear which had been going for his back, and broke off the spearhead from its shaft with only his hand. Another solder came close, only to have his foot stuck where he stood, with the aid of the separated spearhead. Vandheer stabbed the man in the back as he moved away from another spear and ducked under a sword which aimed for his throat. He held his sword backhanded as he pulled it out of the dead soldier on the ground, and stabbed the living one’s underarm right in the middle, and grabbed the soldier’s own sword as he fell. He avoided every swinging blade, every approaching spear, broke the shafts, blocked the swords, dodged every swinging blade and wounded the soldiers mercilessly, from a cutoff toe to stabbing their body parts in the middle. One man lost himself completely in the fight once Vandheer picked up the shining stone Bertha had given him. There was only the officer left, with two of his remaining soldiers.

They were retreating on their horses, already in a gallop. Vandheer threw the sword in his hand towards them, and saw that it pierced the neck of the soldier to the officer’s left, who fell off his horse. He picked up two nearby spears, and ran. He went faster, so fast he couldn’t keep even brake, and was kicking himself forward instead of running, at a speed so high that he was closing in on them. He jumped high up in the air, only ten steps behind the two remaining soldiers. They were kicking their horses in the sides constantly. And then he felt it – the air was alive with fear. He threw the spear in his right hand and put the one in his left hand into his right hand. The spear he had just thrown, hit the soldier’s back. The officer didn’t even look behind as Vandheer filled the air with terror.

Vandheer landed on the ground, and held his left hand towards the officer and his horse, both of which had stopped completely in their tracks. With all his strength, he tossed the spear to the officer’s right, soaring about twice the height of the officer.

And then it happened. The officer jumped off his horse as if an invisible hand had dragged him off, and the blood gushed from his chest, splashing on the ground around him as he lied there, dead. The horse went on to gallop westwards, but no longer towards Derenthil.

The air was no longer filled with fear. Instead, the scent of blood occupied his nostrils. The scent of death.

He saw Sharon riding towards him, Breeze’s reins in her hand.

‘You’re almost worse than them,’ she said, smiling.

‘At least I don’t follow trouble.’

They rode eastwards.

**\***

He looked around himself. They were everywhere, which was unavoidable in this place. It would have been odd if anyone could hide from each other here.

The large, underground cave had been carved out centuries ago, perhaps more than a thousand years ago. He hadn’t been told when to come here either – he just decided to come, for once. Some said his absence made everything quiet, but then again, so did his presence. The rumor of him being there, though, that was the only thing about him which made a stir in this gathering. And there was a stir. It might have been caused by other things, though.

Like his “closer” associates, he wore clothes that looked either like they had once been bathed in blood, or they were dark enough to hide in the most lightless nights. Strangely enough, clothes bathed in blood didn’t make them red, but it gave them a brown hue with a slight touch of red. When he had learned this, he didn’t hesitate to find any missions where he could dye his gear. He had ended up killing a group of five criminals who everybody knew where criminal, while the city’s steward was unable to convict them for murder.

In the end, the steward had informed them of a mission with the purpose of “removing some worry from his mind”. He had even managed to get one of the criminals to admit what they had done. He had figured out it would satisfy his client a little bit, to tell the steward that he was right about the criminals. He had ended up with a new set of gear, while the steward was ridden of his criminals. It was ironic how murderers only ended up getting murdered by assassins like him, but then again, incompetent people would always get beaten by their betters, sooner or later. He was in no place to judge the fairness in any of it, but he didn’t need to either. It was merely a job.

A knife was suddenly stuck on the wall behind the tall, but narrow platform, at the far end of the gathering hall. He was impressed. That someone had actually managed to throw the knife from the other end of the hall and yet have the knife keep enough speed, was no easy feat… except for him, and a few others.

The masses began stirring even more. “They” were coming towards the platform. When “they” finally did, the stir was starting to become a buzz, until a one of “them” did something. In their large, dark brown robes, “they” had expected the stir to quiet down with their presence, but “they” shouldn’t have. There was a reason he didn’t like “them”. He had always thought that “they” didn’t look like the rest of them, “their” hanging sleeves being part of the difference. “Their” large hoods kept their faces hidden, showing nothing but their mouths, no matter the angle of their heads. It was as if light avoided “their” faces, perhaps afraid of their strength and what power they wielded here. He had little understanding for why “they” needed to appear differently to that degree. Everyone else wore tight clothes, commonly allowed exceptions being scarves, napkins, anything that could hang around their neck and cover their mouth and nose, and that way become tight. A few wore capes, and fewer went as far as wearing cloaks, but those were either new or accomplished adherents among them.

And then, one of “them” held up his hand towards the mass. The buzz became a stir, which then developed into silence.

‘The gathering has begun.’

The man’s voice carried across and echoed in the gathering hall, deep underground and hidden from the sunlight. There were less than twenty torches in the gathering hall. Four of them were at the far end, to light up the platform.

‘*It* has happened.’

The stir came back, but the man’s hand killed it.

‘Our search has begun. Seek him out. Find him. And bring him back.’

‘What if he is unwilling to come?’ he asked. Black Hand looked at him from the platform. He could almost feel Black Hand’s eyes on him, though it was not a stare. Others were already looking at him.

‘Then force him to.’

He walked closer to the platform as he spoke.

‘Does anyone here know who we are talking about, Black Hand?’

‘Of course. The last remnant of *them*.’

‘A remnant, whose identity and powers are unknown, is of no use to me, you, or anyone here, Black Hand.’ He came close to the drop right in front of the platform. He placed his right foot on the stone wall, and shifted his balance. He began walking up the wall as if the world had been tilted.

‘But I know who he is. And if we even touch him, he could turn us into cinders.’

‘Then share your wisdom with us, Bane.’

He shifted his balance again once he reached the end of the wall. The world tilted back into its correct position. He, the Bane, had entered the stage. He turned around to the gathering, and walked back and forth on the platform, from the left to the right, and back again.

‘The remnant is but one, and yet, he can achieve that which many can *only* do together. He is the very reincarnation of none other but Evinqar vaal’Nillis.’

Instead of a buzz, or even a stir, *chatter* occupied the grand hall. From the hollow walls to the towering stone pillars where a staircase went up to the ceiling, to the ground which was formed like a dome turned upside down with a staircase across the entire hall, chatter was everywhere. It surprised him that this time, they stuck with those they knew, or were friends with. If it was for the better or the worse, he could not tell.

He unsheathed the small blade that had made him famous, flipping it between his fingers. It was nothing more but a blade, but the sound of it was unique, and it could be heard in a considerable range. He had used it to inspire fear into his victims. And now, silence slowly spread from the platform, all the way to the entry of the hall. Only the sound of a flipping blade could be heard. Its sound could crack a few ears.

The nostalgic feeling of initiation came to him.

‘What is our purpose?’ he asked the mass. They responded in one voice.

‘To maintain order when chaos rises.’

He tossed the knife towards a central pillar in the hall. The echo of steel digging through stone echoed in the hall.

‘Our purpose is to find and exterminate chaos. And if we cannot rid the world of it, we shall find other means to do so. It is that simple. We are not as strong as the Artiphex Nexus, or even the Anzareth Alliance, their enduring followers. We are not in their league. Few of us are gifted in any way that can be compared, and even my own powers are nothing. My name as the Bane is not worth a single notice when compared to an Anzareth whose powers are fully developed. Do you now understand our differences? Do you understand how far away we are, from wielders of black magic?!’

The mass remained silent. Earsplittingly silent. Splendid.

‘Our last hope rests upon the shoulders of *Vandheer Nillis*. Remember that name, burn it into your memory, repeat his name while you sleep, if need be. But never forget this – the world can only be put back into a state of order by the same kind who put it into chaos, be it through defeat, victory, or extinction.’

The Black Hand stepped forward to his side.

‘This meeting is over. You know what to do. Prepare for the day when the Storm returns.’

And with that, thousands of trained, skilled assassins began moving through the different exits of the meeting hall, through the holes in the ceiling to the surface, or through the meeting hall’s large doors to the cave’s large entrances. It was like watching ants at work. Such coordination, such swiftness! The efficiency was almost marvelous.

The world tilted as he started walking on the wall, back to the ground. He decided to take the longer path, by walking to the grand doors that were used primarily for initiations. He could already feel the nostalgia.

‘What is it that you have done, Bane?’

‘I have done what was needed.’

They arrived at a town named *Moon’s Edge*. Supposedly, one of the towers in the city would split the moon in two halves when it was full.

Sharon was looking out for any inns, while Vandheer tried to not attract too much attention by covering himself with some new, more or less ordinary garbs Sharon had brought with her. For a wonder, she had already known his size before they had left Derenthil, and bought some for him. They had ended up at an inn right next to the tower that split the moon, named *The Silver Wing*. As the name implied, they used silver plates, and Sharon had paid quite the handsome sum for “being given less notice, but better treatment”, whatever that was supposed to mean. Vandheer guessed it would mean some subtle way of making their stay better.

While Sharon had been talking to the innkeeper, Vandheer had taken the opportunity to look at what kind of inn *The Silver Wing* was. To his disbelief, Sharon had chosen an inn where high-standing citizens and nobles visited. Unlike the smelling men in old clothes at the inn in Derenthil, these were all dressed in clean, unwrinkled, fashionable clothes, and they drank from their mugs without spilling any of the liquid. A few of them were drinking wine, but their straight backs, their hats, their tidy hair – all of it gave away their position. Sharon had then dragged him along with her as he stood in complete confusion over why she had chosen this inn.

As they placed their saddlebags in their room, Vandheer took the liberty to ask her a few questions. Sharon was counting her stock of coins.

‘Why did you choose this inn? Those men downstairs were obviously nobles.’ Vandheer had only read about such people. He had never seen any before now.

‘Nothing to worry about. Whatever you fear, they won’t pay much attention to you. To them, you are just a foreigner, and not worth *any* attention, especially since we are in Faerin. But if you hadn’t hidden the sword under your cloak, they might have actually talked about you, but then they would think that you were my personal guard.’

‘You’re used to this kind of people?’

‘Honestly, did you think my clients were average citizens?’

Vandheer gave up. He wasn’t used to any of this. He might as well let Sharon take control.

‘Well, why did you decide to come here?’

‘Vandheer, if anything, my answers will probably not satisfy you. We’ll attend to a special celebration here, where we can see the moon be split at sunset. And since you are new to cities, remember to act like my husband while we are here.’

‘What?!’ Vandheer was almost furious about request, but slowly, it dawned on him. He held his face in his hands as his imagination began creating scenes and images he desperately needed to get off his mind. It was futile. He could already hear the sounds.

‘Don’t tell me it’s some sort of celebration.’

‘Oh, carnivals are nothing. You’ll get to know the kingdom of Faerin a little better after this.’

Vandheer gazed at the setting sun, sitting on the chair next to the bed. It wasn’t long until the sky would become red.

And the moon was there.

‘How do I look?’

He looked at her as she closed the door behind her. Sharon had used a fair amount of time switching clothes and tidying up her hair in the other room, but the results were certainly visible. Her black hair was tied up in a bundle at the back of her head, and he could see that she had carefully formed her hair in otherwise impossible ways. No strand of hair was left alone. She wore either the same dress she had worn in her house, or it was a new one which looked purple while she was moving. Nonetheless, it showed a bit of her slender body, and her naked arms didn’t make anything about her less interesting.

‘No eyes can avoid you without effort.’

‘Good. Now stand up. I need to make sure you are… a good-looking excuse of a husband,’ she said, grinning.

Vandheer had tried to imagine a mirror. For some reason, he had difficulties rejecting Sharon’s demands about his clothes. He was dressed in a black robe which shone red from certain angles, and under the robe, he wore other clothes that were black and red. It was obvious that Sharon liked black clothes, but he remained surprised by her demand to have him dressed in red. Maybe it was his eyes.

‘Something isn’t quite right…’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know… ah, of course. Your hair!’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘What?! You have no idea how important it is to keep your hair tidy at this occasion. One strand left alone and…’

He put a finger on her mouth.

‘Trust me.’

‘If you…’

They went out of their room, down the stairs and exited *The Silver Wing*.

As the moon was preparing to send its light, the sun was having difficulties deciding whether Vandheer’s clothes were supposed to be black or red.

‘I knew I was right about you. You suit red more than swords do.’

‘You look like you could blend with the night.’

‘Don’t try to flatter me. I’m still worried about your hair.’

They walked side by side towards a certain point in the city. Vandheer saw the hill where dozens of torches were moving. The entire city seemed to be living. Men and women, children and elderly, everyone he saw was taking part in the celebration, one which made little sense to Vandheer.

‘What is this all about, really?’ he asked. As they walked, he saw what kind of people the city consisted of. Though there were drunken men, they seemed to be as careful as they could around both children and women. He could even see a few city guards making sure everything was alright. One guard raised her spear as Vandheer and Sharon passed her. He was impressed that there were numerous female guards.

‘It’s about the day Faerin’s first queen took the throne. She reigned until she died fifty years later, and it was a time of prosperity many have wished to return to. Scholars claim that Faerin wouldn’t have existed if it wasn’t for her.’

They walked on in silence towards the hill which everyone was moving towards. Vandheer figured it was the best place to watch the moon. He noticed that many people looked at him and Sharon, most probably because they were the only ones in clothes that changed color depending on the angle and the lighting. He could even hear words of envy, and even those clothed in finer garments were taking quick peeks at whoever it was who managed to cause a stir in the main street.

‘About your hair…’

‘Just wait for the moon.’

She looked up at him with resignation. He smiled. She truly didn’t know anything about him.

The lanterns that hung from ropes tied at each side of the main street lit the road dimly, but they most certainly contributed to giving a certain atmosphere. All of a sudden, he heard music. He turned around to look at a bard who was playing on a small, golden harp. The bard had a fine flower between his teeth.

More musicians and people joined the ever-growing stream of people. Flutes, drums, and before he realized it, the bards were all playing together. Vandheer could already hear people at the hill talk about the splitting of the moon, which contributed to making people hurry up. He decided to drag Sharon along the rest of the road, and went on to the hill.

‘You are making my hair…’

‘Don’t worry!’

Even though she protested, he dragged her along with him to one of the higher points of the hill. He couldn’t help it – the citizens’ cheery mood had touched everyone, and he was no exception. Sharon was laughing even after he stopped, and she was fixing her own hair – or so she thought.

‘You… did you keep my hair frozen?’

Vandheer smiled at the suggestion. He had only touched her hair once to make it unable to change form. He moved his hand swiftly towards her bundled hair and made it yield to the soft wind.

‘Not frozen, but it works. Look,’ he said, pointing at the tower he now saw. It was far away, on a mountain ahead of the city. The sun finally went down the horizon, leaving the full moon alone on the sky.

‘I don’t care about the moon, you stupid excuse of a… husband.’

His hair had grown in seconds, the growth process being completely visible. It reached the bottom of his spine, and he knew it was gathered.

‘I don’t have words for such… magic,’ she said, in complete and utter astonishment.

‘Does it suit me?’

‘You have no idea how satisfied I am. Thank you.’

The two last words had come rather unexpectedly.

‘It’s nothing,’ he answered quietly. And then, they sat down on the grassy hill, gazing at the halved moon. A cooling breeze blew across the grass.

‘In blazes…’

At first he thought he had been seeing things, but now he was certain. The tower was lowering. It almost looked like it was being sucked into the earth. And then he realized that it did. And without forewarning, he started to hear the shrieks of bats.

They were everywhere, before he was even aware of it. Even the moon was gone behind the endless curtain of bats. The evening sky was completely blocked out.

A pulse beat inside of Vandheer. Slowly, everything grew darker, as if a barrier was expanding from him. The bat shrieks were almost gone, but they started to grow louder. And louder. As the barrier grew, he heard something else.

*Come to me…*

A devastating pain hit him in his stomach. It was spreading. He felt like he was being ripped apart from the inside.

*Help me…*

His vision was becoming unclear. Everything was shaking, colors turning into one another uncontrollably, his perception rendered useless. Pain. Anger. Chaos. The bat shrieks turned into something worse. They turned into the mythical cry of cursed souls, cries so earsplitting that one’s vision would shatter like glass.

*REVIVE ME!*

‘No!’

Vandheer forced himself to stand, as he reached out towards a passing bat. The creature didn’t stop shrieking in his hand, which was amazing considering that it had already bit him.

He moved his hand, staring into the eyes of the bat. Its eyes shook violently, until the bat dropped dead. He dropped the dead bat. It was only now that he noticed that Sharon was gone.

Infuriated and filled to the brink with power, Vandheer held his hand out towards the living, black curtain. Fire exploded from his hand, setting the sky on fire. In a matter of seconds, the fires assembled into a large formation and suddenly died out, leaving hot cinders to blow on the cooling breeze, scattering across the city of the Moon’s Edge.

# Ultimatum

He watched as the bats burned to their deaths. It had required plenty of work to find all of them. He had spent many nights to find the giant nests, and he had to be as light as a feather to avoid getting noticed, even with focusing on not letting the bats knowing he was there. And when he was close enough… well, if his current bats were all going to burn to death, he might as well retreat for now, instead of recapturing them. Or just stay out of sight.

The bats instinctively gathered in their protective formation, which was rather futile. So much work, all gone in seconds. But not without results.

He decided to go. His work was done.

‘*Aevihn*, what do you see?’

‘A prophecy, child… one of no others.’

‘What is it then?’

‘The Sword of the Spirits… its threads are coming loose.’

Clara dropped the teapot without noticing it, the familiar sound of broken porcelain ringing in her ears. Just as she was about to clean the pieces up from the grass, the doors to the *Aevihn*’s chambers burst open. The High Priestess had come, with two of her maids behind her, two guards holding the doors open.

The *Aevihn* was confined to her own chambers, as prophecies were closely kept secrets. She had four rooms in total; one bedroom, one for writing and studies she might conduct, whatever she would do, another for bathing, cleaning hands, some daily routines. Those three rooms were entirely made in marble, and finally, there was this little garden. It was a small patch of grass with the same marble pavement around it, with light coming from above. The architect had supposedly designed the building so that light could be reflected from all angles and into the patch of grass, which was in the middle of the *Aevihn*’s chambers, but then again, the light could merely be a spell instead of a series of mirrors. Nonetheless, the *Aevihn* often sat in the middle, meditating in the warmth of what seemed to be sunlight on sunny days, and otherwise ambient light, sometimes visited by a certain person.

The High Priestess was a young woman, one who had taken the seat by power and strong words. Being one of the few who were raised in the Shrine itself, she had claimed the seat at the youngest age yet. To empower her authority and strengthen the position of the High Priestess all the more, she was admired as a beauty. She had white hair in spite of her age, but she was undeniably beautiful. Many speculated that her hair might be a sign of her purity and affinity to Order. Her gray eyes enabled her to stare at someone until they finally began to talk. She was disciplined, and harsher than her formers.

‘Wehran, what is the meaning of this?’ she demanded, tossing a sheet of paper towards the aged *Aevihn*.

It was a fairly detailed drawing. As the *Aevihn*’s personal attendant, Clara was allowed to look at the drawing as well.

The moon was split in half by a shining tower, which was surrounded by a fairly lit town. A large, burning shape was on the sky.

‘It is his work… the wielder of that sword.’

Although Clara was aware of the powers of a prophet, she was surprised that this one came to life. Mostly, a prophet would only see or hear something, or even both. The source of their knowledge was mostly from visions and things they heard, but it was rare for some object to enable them to learn something new.

‘Is it he who has set ablaze an entire town?’

‘Disturb me not, child… these visions demand my full attention.’

Everyone in the room waited silently as the *Aevihn*’s closed eyes tensed. A minute passed until she came back. A grim atmosphere had fallen over her.

Clara picked up a large piece of paper, a pen, and an ink bottle. For the first time, she would hear a prophecy coming directly through its medium, the *Aevihn*.

‘*Eras past, Era present, Eras yet to come. Listen closely to the Whisper of Time!’*

Clara recognized that line. It was in about four other prophecies, all foretelling events of great importance. The fragmented sentences boded ill, made worse by the *Aevihn*’s tone.

*‘Darkness in hand, arm stained red, a blood storm follows. Footsteps of warning, beware of raised fingers. Eternal stare, ruin in vision. The One of None, the Angel of Death. Thoughts with no answers, searching the sky. Enemies remembered, revenge to be exacted. Teachings received, few remain kept. Of allies, there are few. The Army of One; beware!*

*‘A magic forbidden, a sword forgotten and denied. A power with life, yet a power of death. The Wandering Eclipse, the Eyes of Death. The Darkness, the stain of his soul, the madness’ source. Safety sought, tragedy befallen. Omnipotence made flesh; beware!*

*‘The red grass, the black mountain; broken tower, surrounded by ruin. Destruction follows his trail; beware!*

*‘Eyes of blood, tears of agony. Heraldic eyes, hair darker than death. Skin alike moonlight, a stark contrast of no other. Black, white, red. Such is his sight, as will he mark the world; beware!*

*‘His hands are stained, a sword unlike any other. The Crystal Sword, the Sword of the Spirits, his sigil and seal, the mark of his heirloom!’*

The *Aevihn* gasped and heaved for air, as happened after every vision. But this time, she was having convulsions as well. She stood up on her shaking legs and ran for the High Priestess, kneeling and holding her forearms.

‘The High Rule will fall! Nations will bleed, thousands upon thousands will die! Do not let the One of None go alone, or we will all collapse under his power! He mustn’t be allowed to seize the throne of his blood!’

Suddenly, the *Aevihn* let out a cry of pain, her back arching backwards. Clara ran to support her, but when she noticed the *Aevihn*’s red eyes and paling pupil, she couldn’t help jumping back in terror. The *Aevihn* still held on to the High Priestess, who acted as if nothing was happening. Fear filled the *Aevihn*’s eyes as if she was seeing death itself.

‘Do not let him alone, child, and act with caution. He is a double-edged sword, no, he is a sword with no handle, a blade freshly out of the forge’s searing fires! He will burn every leash, and with our world on the brink of chaos, the throne of his ancestors will rise! High Priestess Saratheia, no, High Priestess of the Order of Light, the Gatekeeper, the Contractor, Warden of the Three Realms, Saratheia Godalum Marlecis, you cannot let the darkness consume him! Purge him of the chaos that dwells within, before it is too late. You have to!’

The *Aevihn*’s wrinkly hands let go, causing her to fall down on the grass, eyes closed. Her last breath dwindled into a woeful whisper that not even Clara could hear.

The ceremony was about to begin. Wehran’s funeral was prepared. As all other prophets before her, the entire Order – at least those in the Temple of Light – had gathered to attend her funeral.

Everyone was gathered in the Grand Dome. The design was old, from ancient times. It was entirely rounded, and the steps went slowly downwards. In the middle, the steps became a rapid ascension to the top platform, which was higher than even the entrance level. From there, light always shone. Some source of light was at the top of the dome, always lighting up the top of the Grand Dome.

As the tradition required, a choir of novices was assembled at the middle of the hall, facing outwards from the *Aevihn*’s coffin. The novices were all dressed in white, already singing quietly as more Sisters of Light gathered. They were gathered on the steps to the apex.

High Priestess Saratheia witnessed the whole process quietly from the coffin’s elevated platform. The circular stairs that went upwards were all meant to signify the difference between those at lower levels. Only prophets and High Priestesses were given funerals at this platform. The symbolism in the hall was not taught directly, but it was something one learned over time. The walls were filled with old writings, most of which was now illegible. Many attempts at assuming the text or content had been made, with the aid of books that taught old and lost languages. What little had been extracted, had been copied many times in order to preserve old writings. After all, knowledge is power.

But power could easily fall into the wrong hands. As a result, no outsiders were granted permission to learn anything kept within the Order’s hand. And everyone who had heard Wehran’s final prophecy was to keep it to the grave, and maybe even beyond, if an afterlife existed. Reincarnations were still nothing more but speculations, but some events hinted at it.

She was dressed entirely in white today. Her white robe was as simple as it could get – it hung somewhat loosely, with a hood large enough to cover one’s eyes. She had decided to not wear any jewelry or particularly outstanding clothing. It would have been pompous and ignorant, but most of all, disrespectful towards Wehran.

Though the old prophetess had always called her “child” – which Saratheia did not mind after a few weeks, since the gap between their ages was indeed vast – she had immense respect for the old woman. Despite being a prophet, she had handled it all with patience, endurance, resolve, and strength. Saratheia would never know the prophetess’ private thoughts, as that was the duty of the attendant of the *Aevihn*. Male prophets didn’t have the privilege of any confidential attendants – there was, however, always someone near the doors, in case something happened.

After all, there were significant differences between men and women – especially among prophets.

Saratheia could almost feel Order as a liquid around her, with all her “daughters” in here. She still had difficulties thinking of them as her daughters, as she was the youngest High Priestess yet, and while speculations of her maturity, determination and experience still floated in the air, she had done everything in her power to keep the speculations from growing. She would let them speculate for now, given that Wehran’s funeral was more important, and when an opportunity appeared, she would strike it down.

Most of her daughters had now gathered. Silent prayers were whispered, in quiet humility of the prophetess. Though few prophecies made by the *Aevihn* told of misfortunate events to come, it was mostly a good sign of quiet, prosperous times, where trivialities were the greatest priorities on the agenda. Though the days could seem monotonous, Saratheia had gotten used to it ever since her first footsteps in the Sanctum. But her mind could still not gain clarity.

The prophecy from yesterday was stuck in her mind. *The One of None*. Such a prophecy had so many possible interpretations. She would have to let her bed stay untouched tonight.

Vandheer couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The entire town was in chaos. Monsters from fairytales, entire blocks on fire, scorched carcasses everywhere. As if something inside him awakened, he was prepared for battle the moment one of the monsters spotted him.

It was huge, at least twice his size. It was grotesque, and its skin was grey and dirty. Its arms and legs bulged with muscles and fat, its belly hung out as well. The monster’s head looked like some deformed human’s face, with such an irregular shape of the skull it could not be anything born from nature. The monster stared at him, filled with such relentless madness as he had never seen. The giant hands could probably crush anything.

Without warning, the monster picked up what had to be a large club made out of stone. The monster swung it towards Vandheer as if it was a wood stick, causing the ground to shake heavily as it smashed down on the ground. It missed, but Vandheer was nonetheless impressed by such strength.

He put his hand flat down on the ground. In a second, fire ran from his fingers to the monster’s feet, climbing all the way to the head until the monster was nothing but a flaming bonfire. The monstrous roar was unimpressive, but as he waited for the monster to die, more monsters howled across the town.

Vandheer looked around himself. The same monsters were coming from several directions. Apparently they weren’t mindless. He had no choice.

He closed his eyes. He felt as if time was warped around himself, passing so slowly that movements were barely noticeable. When he opened his eyes, the ashen carcass of a monster lay ahead of him on the ground, with two seemingly healthy monsters right behind it. He could feel the monsters behind him. Everything was slightly redder than he could remember. He could feel the blood crawling along his skin.

Without any forethought, he rushed towards the monsters in front of him, taking a leap towards the one to the left, creating a shaft of ice out of nothing, covering his arm in it. As the monster cried in agony, the ice expanded from that which was already on his arm, growing inside the monster. As Vandheer split off his arm from the rest of the ice, it shattered entirely, leaving all the content in the monster fragmented and solid. It all happened in a fraction of a second.

The monster right next to him was about to hit Vandheer with the stone club.

Concentrating a force he had always been familiar with, he punched right through it, transforming the stone club into dust and gravel. The monster, confused at its empty hand, was open. Without any further ado, Vandheer pulled back and flung his hand in the monster’s direction. Flames exploded in front of the monster, with such violent force that it was blasted into one of the burning buildings, breaking the weakened support, resulting in the monster becoming buried in ruins.

Vandheer turned around swiftly to face the remaining monsters. To his surprise, they were already gone. Somehow, the fires had been doused as well, as he could only barely see the smoke that the moon lit up. Or was it just clouds?

He waited. No sound, no sudden movements.

A pair of eyes was on him. He could feel it, but he had no idea if it was dangerous or not.

He straightened his back and decided to look around. He had no idea what had just happened, and intended to find out who or what had just suppressed the chaos.

Minutes passed as he met searched for signs of activity. There was nothing, nothing at all. Not even a broken piece of wood from a scorched house fell off. The sound of falling stone and brick was completely absent. The night sky dimly lit the ruined town, if it could be called anything else but ruins.

*In blazes…*

He had never experienced anything like this. Complete and utter chaos, reduced to eerie silence devoid of life or time – it was beyond comprehension. Someone had been at work, someone powerful. Vandheer had no idea if he could call such a person an equal, in terms of power. Or worse, it could be something he had never heard of.

Rattling sounds came from his left. Vandheer turned immediately towards the source of the sound, only to find a young, ragged man with chains holding his hands together. He supposed the man had somehow released himself from some prison amidst all the chaos. The prisoner looked up towards Vandheer, and the moment their eyes met, the prisoner fell to the ground, rolling over with his back on the ground. Vandheer hurried over to the prisoner, examining him. He was skinny, and very dirty, obviously one who had been in prison for many years. But his eyes were disturbing.

The pupils stretched out at certain areas like black spikes. The man’s eyes were bloodshot, but without the familiar red color. Like his pupils, they were black. Vandheer took a step away from the prisoner. It was only now that he noticed the truly disturbing things – the man was entirely marked by black… *wounds*. He had never seen anything like this; burns with black cuts across, as if the man’s flesh had been burned black. At the same time, the man looked like he had been on a rampage.

He decided to leave Moon’s Edge. The city had no hope for recovery, and the future was as bleak as it could get.

Immediately leaving the city, Vandheer went northeast. Somewhere in his mind, something had answered to the chaos, echoing in his mind, urging him forward. And somehow, he knew he wouldn’t be left alone.

The sound of the opening library door was what woke up Leila, who had fallen asleep while lying on a resting carpet, reading a book on how magic could stimulate the growth of plants, or change them radically.

She gasped, clearing tears from her eyes as she struggled to get up on her feet and look who had entered the library this late at night. The light orb in her hand shone dimly. When she saw who had entered, she suddenly woke up completely.

Even though she was young – and they were probably of equal age, give or take a few years – the High Priestess was still an astonishing sight. She was a beauty and undoubtedly attractive to the eyes of men. But her harshness and authority was always a shock to counter that side of her, and even Leila couldn’t help jumping. It wasn’t something she would expect from that face, and that figure. She almost made a squeak when she noticed that the High Priestess was walking towards her, bowing instead.

‘High Priestess…’

‘Who are you?’

She couldn’t help being surprised by such directness either. Leila straightened her back, suddenly sleepy once more. She really was taller than the High Priestess. She swayed unwillingly, slightly out of balance.

‘This is Leila, High Priestess,’ a voice behind the High Priestess said. Leila recognized the woman, but she had never quite learned her name. She knew it was one of the counselors, the one who always accompanied the High Priestess. She was middle-aged, not old yet.

‘Student of prophecy and ancient arts, and… the one who sleeps on the library floor with exclusive permission.’ The counselor failed to suppress her own sleepiness.

Leila looked away, having blushed at the last part. There was a couch she usually slept on, but she preferred reading while lying on a carpet. Sometimes she felt like sitting on a chair instead. She couldn’t help falling asleep at the carpet, as getting up and to the couch would sometimes wake her up. These carpets were relatively soft either way – she’d gotten used to them after a few nights.

‘I was told that you have been given access to even the dangerous prophecies,’ the High Priestess said. To Leila, it sounded more like an inquiry.

‘Come with me.’

She almost lost her balance. Leila nodded, and followed the High Priestess to wherever they were going. She noticed that the counselor had left.

The library was spaced and among the largest in the world – if not *the* largest – and contained texts, scriptures, prophecies, drawings, paintings, objects of power or historical value, and things that did not suit normal libraries.

The bookshelves were tall and wide, but there were benches between every shelf. At the opposite end of the library entrance there was a staircase which led deeper into the library, to the part which contained things that were kept away from weak and ignorant minds. Leila was one of the few students who had permission to go there on her own, albeit for different reasons.

Few things truly dazzled her, but that might have been because that she was so used to everything down there now, or rather, used to the seriousness of what was hidden down below. She was, like all others, a victim to the heavy atmosphere, the presence of knowledge and power so great that it wasn’t safe for commoners to learn anything that was confined within these rooms.

The stone door was locked with a spell of great complexity. Nothing could crush the stone door, and it wouldn’t move unless someone unlocked it, which was exactly what the High Priestess did, the moment she touched the cold limestone door in the center. The moving lock of light in the center of the door rotated and seemingly went inside the stone, eventually unlocking the spell and the door. The lock remained visible on both sides of the door until they had closed it behind them.

The deeper library still contained the atmosphere of ancient dangers. While dangerous and prominent objects were stored in the back of the library, the books were the first ones to greet visitors. Many of them were old texts, although the originals were kept even deeper into the library. Leila had only read copies, but they contained the exact same text as the original ones.

Prophecy was left to its own section, while historical books of notable and sinister events and individuals were left to their own corners. Books on magic occupied the majority of the bookshelves, and important studies, works and drawings were also given their own area. Leila knew the deeper library quite well, and she had probably read a whole bookshelf by now, including the entire library.

The High Priestess went immediately towards the prophecies, looking at the books that were placed higher up on the shelves and therefore required a ladder, which Leila had noticed swiftly and brought to her at once. In the deeper library, it was forbidden to use one’s powers to bring the books to oneself, as every copy was to be handled as if it was the original. Every copy required loads of careful work and countless hours, not to mention the strain of copying books of prophecy.

The High Priestess removed a thin book covered with black leather from the shelf. Leila had no clue about which book it was, but once she saw the glinting text and the symbol below it, she recognized the book immediately. There were few other books with similar design, and the symbol could not be mistaken for anything but what it was.

*The Crystal Blade.*

Leila cleaned the nearby table, putting all the books behind another shelf.

Contrary to what people thought, books of prophecy were not texts. They were rarely read; they were *experienced*.

The moment the High Priestess opened the black leather cover, light shone from the book, with the pages turning rapidly. The prophecy was being unveiled. They entered another world.

They were in a dark hall, lit up by a beam of light from the center. There were stone pillars everywhere, with width equal to a man’s height and reaching into unknown darkness. There were so many pillars that the darkness eventually veiled them completely.

A slightly elevated platform stood in the light. Leila followed the High Priestess, who was already on her way to examine what stood in the bright center.

Despite the fact that Leila had been through this prophecy before, the shady, liquid silhouette of a man startled her almost more than last time. She had already heard the footsteps. They were exactly as she remembered them – echoing, rhythmic, and somehow, *mighty*. She hurried over to the High Priestess, who already stood in the light, facing her and the liquid shadow man who was approaching the light.

A male voice with no apparent source began whispering phrases and warnings. Just like the liquid shadow man, they too startled her. The High Priestess kept her eyes on the man.

‘*… the eyes of blood, the only one of his kind. Kings and queens will tremble before his might, shaking the foundations of Order. Not even the Light that surrounds us both can eradicate his Darkness, for his Darkness is the power of the Abyss, it is Oblivion itself.’*

The man came closer to the light.

For some reason, Leila had always known that this was the center of the vast hall of darkness. After all, where else would a sword be stabbed into a pedestal? Where else could the Sword of the Spirits be hidden from the world?

The shadow hand took hold of the handle, pulling the sword from its pedestal, with blinding light shining from beneath it as if liquid light was stored below. When the man had removed the sword entirely from its seal, the sword showed its true form.

Still radiating with light, Leila began to see the outline of the fabled Blade of Threads. The one-edged blade was wavy and looked like it was made by threads, with both small and larger hollows where a solid blade should have been. Even the cross guard, which was of its own kind in terms of shape, seemed to be made by strings, with such an uneven surface. The entire sword was, to the eye, made of bright blue threads. And then the voice returned.

‘*With the Blade of Threads, the world will be ensnared in terror, with darkness as comfort, for it is only the darkness that it has learned to know.’*

And then, as the entire hall began to shake, dust falling from above, the liquid shadow man turned his head as he sheathed the shining sword in a veil of shadow, hiding the sword entirely.

He looked at Leila with a malicious stare of madness. His eyes were red – blood red.

As everything vanished like shadows faded away with light, they were back in the deeper library.

Leila didn’t feel well, but the sight of the slightly frightened High Priestess was alarming. Her hands were tightened as well, her knuckles as white as her hair. Her eyes stared at nowhere. Leila didn’t know if she saw concern or fear in those grey eyes.

‘… Leila, was it?’

‘Yes, High Priestess.’

‘From now on, you are under my command. You will not tell anyone about what we are doing, except for those I point out. You will not hint at anything, you will not reveal anything. Do you understand?’

It was obvious to Leila that the High Priestess was flustered by the prophecy. It almost surprised her that she was more used to it than the High Priestess, but then again, she was a student of prophecy, unlike what the High Priestess had been before her ascension. But there was something lingering in those grey eyes. Was it determination? Could it be fear, was it the involuntary excitement over a chaotic future that was described in the diaries of soldiers? Or maybe it was just fear?

She nodded. Somewhere in Leila’s mind, she was preparing. For who, she was certain, and yet she did not know who it was. But she knew it would be the man with the blood red eyes.

# Veiled

Lieutenant Targail Abheric was on his usual patrol around the sunny outskirts of the city Narfum, the capital of the country with the same name. Most people added *city* after, but Targail had never found it suitable. He rarely found the need to address the city’s name anyway.

He was often surprised by what he might find on his patrol, nowadays. Despite being a coastal city with two rivers flowing through it, he had found many people lying on the ground on the barren plains that dominated the state of Narfum. Many of them had lost their memory – they didn’t know their names, their homes, and couldn’t remember family or friends. Some couldn’t even speak properly. When he had brought them into the city, he had never seen them again. Not that it could be helped – people who had lost everything they had, tended to lose their lives, or throw it away.

The finding of these individuals was unsettling, and Targail had reported this to the city council. They hadn’t made any decision yet, but reports of Moon’s Edge’s business suddenly coming to a complete stop, stirred suspicion in his mind. Though he only had theories based on speculation, his closer superiors had listened to him, and they too thought that something was going on. Unlike them, he wasn’t excited, and he avoided trouble if he could, which was one thing that made him qualified for a promotion, according to his closer superiors.

Furthermore, the kingdom of Elzraei had sent out accounts of a man with black hair and red eyes. Of all fairytales Targail had heard in his childhood, it was very uncreative, and supposedly this bloke possessed dark powers. It sounded more like madness infecting the royal bloodline, but he did not bother with protesting. Orders were orders – if anyone with matching appearances were found, they were to be brought before the city council. One of the members was, if the rumors were to be believed, accommodating a representative from Elzraei. The more daring rumors involved affairs of a certain category, but they were probably just rumors nonetheless.

Today though, the captain had joined lieutenant Abheric. Like some others, he too considered Targail a man one could talk to without fears. It was actually as simple as that Abheric merely respected people. The captain had brought some men with him, as an excuse. They rode a bit ahead.

‘I don’t like what’s been happening, recently. It’s instinct to look for water, but those people seem to lack that as well. What do you think, lieutenant?’

‘I feel the same way as you do, captain. But this report from Elzraei is a bit…’

‘Disturbing, is it not? The next thing we need is a fairytale, and next thing we know, rumors and chaos is spreading like wildfire all over our calm city. Don’t you miss the old times, lieutenant?’

‘Honestly, no, as I wasn’t engaged at that time.’

‘Haha! Good one, lieutenant. Just what I needed. You know, I think you will climb the ranks like no other. The other captains are talking about recommending you for a promotion. Few handle outbursts in the city like you do, and even the council brightens up at your name. How good is that, eh?’

‘Sir…’

Somewhere in the horizon, Targail could see a person coming. Someone wearing black, riding on a horse. And swiftly.

‘Even the council knows about you!’

‘Sir, look,’ Targail said, pointing out at the stranger coming ever closer to them.

The captain became focused the moment his eyes were set on the stranger. And then, they waited. They eventually made out the black hair, and went to meet the stranger, with the soldiers riding behind them.

‘Halt!’

The soldiers reined in their horses behind them, and Targail stepped down on the ground, walking slowly towards the stranger on the horse in front. Fortunately, the stranger had stopped a bit away from them, allowing Targail to examine the stranger while walking closer. The captain was right behind him.

At first, he thought he should be disappointed, but he quickly replaced that thought with the thought of being fortunate. It was a woman, and though he couldn’t see her eye color from this distance, he could tell it wasn’t a bright color. She was undoubtedly a beautiful woman, and her black clothes shone purple when the angle was correct. When she raised her chin a bit, Targail stopped. He had learned next to nothing about women from his experiences with his fiancée, but on every little signal, he knew to take the safer option. This woman seemed to be quite confident, and determination was painted on her face. For what reasons she was coming to Narfum, he could only wonder.

‘Good day, my lady. I beg your pardon for stopping you, but have you seen any black-haired men with red eyes?’

‘Fortune isn’t on your side today, lieutenant,’ the woman answered.

Targail Abheric blinked. She was smiling as if she knew something.

‘Maybe some other time it will. Would the lady allow herself to be escorted?’

‘Regrettably, I consider solitude a luxury, lieutenant.’

‘Then I wish you a safe journey, my lady.’

‘Thank you.’

Targail watched the woman from the corner of his eye as she rode towards the city.

‘She knows her way around things,’ the captain said.

‘And she knew our ranks,’ Targail answered. The captain was unfazed. Of course, it was obvious – the captain was halfway grizzled now, the other soldiers had stayed back and Targail was about the same age as the soldiers, give or take a few years.

The captain drew out his sword – a straight, double-edged blade with a glinting tip – and, as when he usually had something in mind, polished it with a cloth he had hanging from his belt.

‘She had strange eyes though. I think it would be for the better to let some higher-up learn of this, and it would be best to return now. After all…’

‘We are but soldiers. ’

Vandheer was finally within the city walls. He knew there would be guards here as well, but there were others who wore hooded cloaks like him here as well, or even hooded robes.

As he wandered around the city, looking for what he might need to travel eastwards, he saw things which he had never seen before –inns, taverns, markets of all kinds, and fresh creatures of the ocean that had been butchered. Everything was tightly packed, with narrow alleyways just within sight and main streets full of people. A tall castle was built on a hill, three towers reaching from the middle and each far side. The middle tower was the tallest, seemingly reaching clouds. The castle was surrounded by more fortifications and a small, circled forest.

It was obviously made with the power of an Artiphex. Like many other things made with such power, there was something with that castle. He could feel it.

A violent pain hit Vandheer in the middle of his chest. The tremor in his legs forced him down on his knees, supporting himself with his stable left hand. His right arm was completely out of control, hanging from his shoulder. He could hear his quickening heartbeat as if is ear was right next to his heart. An earsplitting sound came to his ears, only to be replaced by a noisier one. He could only barely hear people around him, until he could see himself being lifted from the ground. The dizziness made everything unfocused. Whatever it was that he was thinking about had vanished from him, leaving his mind an empty hollow.

He drifted into darkness.

When he woke up, it didn’t take long before Vandheer realized that he was in a lightless room, lying on a somewhat soft surface and covered by something all over him. Probably a bed and a blanket. The chains attached on his wrists resisted whatever he tried to do to them, which was an ill-boding sign.

He waited, listening for sounds, awaiting the slightest movements in the darkness that surrounded him. He knew that to some, darkness was equal with fear. To him, it was a comfort and an ally.

Light came into the room as an opening suddenly emerged. Eyes already adjusted to darkness, Vandheer covered his face. Footsteps accompanied the sound of a creaking door. Whoever it was who had entered, Vandheer had no choice but to make precautions. He could feel the darkness creeping along the floor, eventually seizing the shadows in his firm grasp.

‘Hm?!’

It was a man, who was clearly surprised by his inability to move from where he stood. Vandheer slowly put his hands down from his face, eventually noticing a figure behind the man he had frozen in place. If only the light had been behind both of them, he could have stopped them both. A female voice came from behind the man. The source of it eventually entered the dark room as it spoke.

‘Relax, Artiphex. There is no need to take a mere soldier as hostage. Besides, he wouldn’t work very well as one either way. The city council has a supply of men, in case the need becomes present.’

For a wonder, the woman looked like someone he knew. She had long, dark blue hair, and Vandheer could see her long nails. He could already figure out her abilities. Obviously a fighter, but he didn’t see why she had such long hair. It reached her waist, which was quite the rare sight. She was somewhat pretty, but the smile on her face made her quite the ominous one. Almost wished his hands hadn’t been locked in chains.

‘Besides, it’s a long time ago since I last met one of my own kin,’ she said.

‘How do you know I am one?’ Vandheer asked.

‘Ha! Do not take me for a fool, boy. Like me, you clearly distinguish yourself from all others, but enough of that. The city council demands to see you.’

Vandheer soon realized he had little choice, if this woman was as powerful as he thought. Of those he had known, few had been able to hide their own shadows.

He followed her through white corridors that were decorated with paintings and symbols, scattered across the walls, the ceiling and even the floor. Though he was walking barefooted, the floor wasn’t cold to him. If it had been, he could easily fix that, but he was sure the woman wouldn’t let him do that either. The many servants that they passed – mostly young maids around his age – could all have been perfect escape opportunities for Vandheer, if the woman hadn’t enchanted the chains.

‘What is your name?’ he asked.

‘Temara Einshrit. Not that it matters, since you have a bounty on your head.’

They finally reached an end to the corridors, the staircases, and all the decorations. Just ahead of them was a large white double door, decorated with symbols and writings Vandheer couldn’t make out. On the higher part of it, a tall fortress appeared on top of a cloud, with a tower in the middle of it, the sun placed at the very top. When the doors opened, it reminded him of the split moon.

What met his eyes was quite the sight, but he was also surprised. A circle of podiums, in which there was one table and chair each, was around Vandheer as Temara guided him to the middle of the room. He looked around himself as the old men and women behind the chairs sat down and studied something on their tables. Each of the table was solid in the front, and they all had their individual symbol. The walls were decorated with ornaments, seemingly depicting events of importance. One of them showed a man hit by an arrow, who in turn had cut the heart of an enemy.

The shocking thing though, was the person walking along the walls of the room.

‘So, Temara, you are absolutely sure this is the one?’ one of the old men said. He was still studying whatever it was that rested on the table.

‘Yes, my lord. Have a look.’

One by one, each of the elderly ones looked up from their tables.

‘Quite the unique one, this young man,’ one of the women said.

‘Remember, he is an Artiphex,’ Sharon said. She was still circling the edge of the round room.

‘You said your chains could suppress him entirely.’

‘Only his powers.’

‘Well, we have no reason to believe that Vandheer Nillis is any threat to us now, do we?’ Another woman said. Vandheer looked over at her. Her hair was almost completely white, but it was no more but a bright hue of grey. She had her share of wrinkles.

‘Now, young man, would you know anything about why the lords of Elzraei have put a bounty on you? That you are wanted alive is quite odd-’

‘When wanted by a king, it is usually for execution, or any selfish reason to exact vengeance, isn’t it?’ Vandheer shot in.

The old woman blinked. All the other council members showed a reaction, one way or another. A moistened lip, leaning forward or taking a deep breath – he saw all of it. One of the male councilors took the word.

‘Unless you have done anything that would call forth a king’s wrath, we won’t kill you, Vandheer Nillis. On the contrary, we are interested to your story behind all of it. A cornered man has little to lose, when his fate is otherwise already decided.’

‘Arkas, watch your tongue,’ the almost white-haired councilor said. ‘What we mean to say is, Vandheer Nillis, that if you tell us what has caused the recent events, we will allow you to go.’

Vandheer studied the clothing the councilors wore. They wore a shade of purple in the center of their fine robes, but black and white dominated their outfits, their sleeves also having a bit of purple. He was fairly certain they didn’t think the same way as their colors suggested.

‘Tell me then, how big is it? What caused a city council to react to a mere bounty? What is it that you fear?’

The same reactions returned. One of the councilors seemed to be sweating. Sharon had stopped, and was looking at Vandheer from time to time.

‘Consider it a small price for my story,’ he added. All of the councilors looked at each other. The number of shakes equaled the number of nods. Only one showed no decision. It was the one with the almost white hair. She spoke.

‘Where are you from, Vandheer Nillis?’

‘I was raised in the Black Mountains.’

‘Very well. The High Rule, as it is, has lost stability, unity and power. Members of the High Rule – empires, kingdoms, republics, theocracies – are no longer united in the same causes. What they once stood for is nothing more but a vague memory. Gatherings, agreements, visits, interactions in general, have faded and ended. Emissaries are almost unheard of, and these are but comfortable positions in the staff of any noble house. Scavenges for olden objects and texts have begun, as far as we know. Some villages of ancient and unique ancestry have been assaulted and left in ruins, for no reason we can imagine. Others of historical value have also become mounds of debris. Few of these attacks left any survivors, though you are the newest one we know of, apart from what happened at the Moon’s Edge, and we have yet to learn anything.’

Vandheer was completely numb.

‘We could do nothing, young one. Though we have spies – which we have placed only in retaliation – there is nothing we can do outside our borders. We councilors were also in the dark, concerning your home. We knew nothing about the Nexus at the time, and when we learned of the raid, it was already too late. We feared that the king of Elzraei was searching for objects of power, but our spies have reported nothing worth note, except for that nothing particular was found, which isn’t quite comforting.’

‘Why is that?’ Vandheer asked. The one who seemed to be the oldest of the men spoke.

‘That which is unknown can be just as dangerous as that which *is* known, Vandheer Nillis, and what we know is how much we *don’t* know about your kind. The Nexus itself remains the greatest mystery, for it had a way of burning every trace it left and almost every single word written about its secrets while there are no solid secrets to be found. The fact that they trusted no one but themselves proves the secrecy and dangerous nature of their work, and how they strived to make the world unknowing of their actions, their creations, perhaps even their mistakes. Like all other gatherings of powerful men, the Nexus must have created objects with power equal to their own, if not more violent. Written and widely known descriptions of such objects would be very discomforting, and lead to utter chaos…’

‘The same kind of chaos that now courses through the High Rule,’ the almost white-haired woman continued. The previous councilor took the word again. Each of the councilors seemed to know the others through and through.

‘Now that we have confirmed the chaos that has corrupted the High Rule… tell us, Vandheer Nillis, what is it that you intend to do? What is left, when you have lost everything you know? What is it that keeps you on your feet?’

He stood there silently, feeling Sharon’s eyes and powers on him. The twisted shadow in his right hand formed a single word – *well?*

The shadow changed to questions, all of which he had no idea on how to answer. He tried to think back in time, reach the unknown feelings that had touched him. He closed his eyes.

‘Do you seek vengeance? Do you intend to abandon this world, or destroy it? Do you-’

‘I will stop them.’

The counselors were all taken aback. The old man’s voice was hesitant.

‘Stop who, Vandheer Nillis?’

‘Does that even matter? I will find out sooner or later.’

Vandheer sensed his powers coming back. He looked down at the chains. Intricate writing was formed by the ice that had come there. He would have to do it the more brutal way. She wouldn’t help him any further but give him an opening. As he had anticipated, freedom was not something most people intended to give him. He just had to take it by force instead.

The power surged through him as his eyes were closed. With a shout, he split his wrists from each other, sending metal splinters flying in all directions. The remainder of the chains fell off from his wrists, clanking on the ground.

He didn’t even need to look in her direction to know that Temara was already coming towards him with a spell ready. Her power radiated, but she was a simple woman – such a spell was useless against him.

As he turned around, only her hand came towards him. But it never hit, and nothing came from it. In her panic, she had let go of her shadow. He stared into through her eyes, into her very soul. He whispered quietly, so that only she could hear him.

‘Be afraid.’

His vision turned red as Temara’s hand gained the same color. The red liquid enveloping her hand crawled up her arm, and then onto her body. And then it came – the shrill cry of a woman in fear.

He ran for the doors. The guards that met him tried to stop him with their spears, only to stab air as he dodged them. He grabbed the shafts and split them, smelting the metal at one the joints. As he dashed through the corridors, some soldiers tried to stop him, although in vain. Their efforts were futile. The spearheads that came flying towards made them stop pursuing him as well.

What he recognized as the entry doors, were finally in sight. What he did not expect though, was a number of nobles entering through them. Nonetheless, he took the opportunity to escape.

High walls surrounded the castle, with a closed gate right in front of him. Guards were patrolling on top of them. None of the guards had noticed Vandheer yet. Perhaps they didn’t even have any orders concerning him. Even so, he wouldn’t dare to take any chances.

He dashed towards the right side of the walls. He jumped up and climbed up the tall stone wall, which he climbed surprisingly swiftly. He managed to get a firm grip on the edge of the wall, climbed up halfway, and looked around for any nearby guards. There was one a few steps away. He wouldn’t have to knock him out.

As Vandheer landed on the other side of the castle barriers, he went immediately to the surrounding woods. They provided him plenty of shadows – a safe environment, or rather, *his* environment.

He went to the city immediately, stealing what he needed. Though he should have felt guilty, he couldn’t allow his conscience to stop him now, especially when he was already on his way out of the city. The feeling of someone breathing down his neck kept his feet moving and his mind focused on escape.

Though he had done it as stealthily as he could, the inn owner had noticed the lack of a good horse. Her only lead was red eyes, which was a ridiculous notion. At least Vandheer had learned that he wasn’t known among civilians, for the time being.

As he travelled northeast, he stocked up on any villages he came across – handing out the payment, now that he was in less dangerous environments – though it was rarely needed. He found what he needed in the forests on his path, and for a wonder, the horse seemed to welcome his company.

‘… This is getting ridiculous.’

‘Never say that in front of your superiors, lieutenant, especially not your other ones.’

‘I know, captain, but having us search for him after he’s escaped…’

Lieutenant Abheric was slightly unnerved. One thing was that they were going to hunt down some man wanted by the crazed kingdom of Elzraei, but it was not a small feat to escape the clutches of the city council. The city council had powerful allies, none of which were available to those of lower ranks in the city. Who these allies were remained a secret, but every guard knew that the council’s allies possessed something no one else had. That someone escaped these powers – and wounded one of these allies – was no comfort. It could only become worse, from now on. The captain was very conscious of that.

‘I know what you’re thinking, lieutenant. Someone wishing us a safe journey would be better off wishing us a *return*.’

‘That’s not what I meant. If it really was that red-eyed man who escaped, he can probably kill us in seconds. If he is stronger than the council’s allies…’

The captain put his hand on Targail’s shoulder. The lad still had things to learn. Not about the life of a soldier, but the life of a man. No, actually, that didn’t really matter. It was a general rule for people with their heads firmly attached to their bodies.

‘Lad, when someone wants you to run across a black chasm, death, or a terribly crippling slide down to the bottom is the obvious result. But the question is: what will you do?’

‘Captain, are you…’

He couldn’t help laughing at the young man. What a fool boy, he still had things to do with his life. He would have to guide the young one.

‘Lad, we are deserting. When rumors of crazed kings drift along the wind, there’s little reason to doubt the same thing happening with the council, or anyone else for that matter. We don’t really have a choice. You want to hear what I was told when I objected to this?’

Targail Abheric only blinked. The young lad was probably still in shock of the captain’s daring words.

‘They told me I might as well quit! Haha!’

Leila was, as she usually did nowadays, waiting at the outer walls. The Sanctum was within the inner walls, as it was in the center of the city. The city itself was named after the small island it was built on - Sylus.

Though some might have called it a natural wonder, the isle of Sylus was created through magic. From the glaciers up north, rivers had been carved. Being surrounded by water, connected to the mainland through six bridges, it had been formed this way because it would otherwise be exposed to invaders. The bridges as well were made through the power of the Order, as they were long and wide. The rivers flowing around made the island somewhat distant from land.

The city itself wasn’t all that impressive. Though it had been built over long time, with the Order’s aid and influence, the city did deserve its title as a city. It was comparable to state capitals and other major cities, but only in terms of size. Aside from the rest of Sylus, the Sanctum itself was quite a marvelous thing to behold. With its four towers, and the complex that was inside of the inner walls, it was a common attraction.

However, Sylus hadn’t been left alone, especially when it was the location and home to what many considered the most powerful organization on the face of the earth. It had been in the midst of battle many times, being assaulted by conspiracies and alliances between states and factions that believed that the Order was plotting for world dominance and total control. The Sanctum had been repaired many times, and had been reinforced each time when it was called for. No siege weapons could break its walls; no man could ever hope to capture it.

But there had been a situation once, back when the Order was younger.

The High Priestess had ordered Leila to watch for the man at the gates of Sylus. Leila hadn’t questioned her, but she asked what passage in the book implied that he would come. For a wonder, the High Priestess didn’t make any particular gap in between their positions. Leila had no intention of asking why; when it came to prophecies, there was little doubt about how serious the matter at hand was.

As the day slowly passed by, a few soldiers chatted with her every now and then – most of which were decent men, with a few exceptions of fresh recruits or scarred veterans – and sometimes, she had been told to return to the Sanctum. She had returned twice, but only to pick up three books filled with history, myths and long forgotten legends. The High Priestess had told her to look for anything which might be relevant, anything which might point at something in the future or inform them about the man. The best thing for Leila to delve into was what powers this man might have. She had no idea what kind of man he could be, other than that he would obviously be a wielder of fearsome powers, which his personality had certainly been marked by.

To her discontent, the book she had to read was enormous. To dishearten her even further, not a single page so far had any good news for her, and there no other books that could confirm what was written in this one. She could only hope that the High Priestess wouldn’t become enraged.

The village was rather strange to Vandheer’s eye. It was backed by quite the unusual hill – it looked like it had been cleaved in two halves, and then, one part had been carved into what was now a relatively small village, for all the stone that might have been used. Every single building was built with limestone, and the surface on each and every structure was somewhat smooth.

Nothing in the village had been crafted through ordinary means. The faint residue of earthen powers lingered in his hand as he felt the white wall he was climbing on. He dropped on the other side of the wall as swiftly as he could, barely escaping unseen. He had been forced to make a guard trip and bark in irritation. That he had made it to the walls without being spotted was almost unbelievable. He had left the horse once he had reached the forest that was right outside the village. Without hesitation, he ventured deeper into the village. It had an odd air to it, and he soon discovered why.

Despite the fact that he was covered in his travelling cloak, and only carried a single bag with him, he received piercing stares from surprisingly many people. He was quite sure that strangers were uncommon in this place.

He entered what seemed to be an inn, or at least a tavern. The stables would serve him well, eventually, but he still couldn’t get that odd feeling off his mind. The very atmosphere in the village reminded him constantly of his own powers.

What greeted Vandheer inside was not any big surprise – a few men talking over some beverage, some serving girls. He decided to sit down at his own table. Though he could barely hear it, he figured the men were whispering about him. It was not surprising, either way – he was keeping his hood on. They eventually concluded that he was some murky stranger.

He waited for one of the serving girls to come over, elbows on the table, hands folded, until he noticed the woman behind the counter, on the other side of the saloon. She was staring at him. She had dark, brown hair, and was attractive in a way he had never seen before. Her self-confidence practically glowed from her.

Vandheer could already feel his heart beating faster. The woman had already noticed. He was using his powers to darken his face, but only to the level in which his eyes would become invisible. And then, as slowly as she could, she gave him a signal. She pointed at him, then to the door behind her, outside the counter. Could he trust her? On the other hand, he didn’t want any trouble, but he had no idea who she was.

An ambient source of light popped up under his face. His eyes were no longer hidden. The moment he looked back at the woman, she was smiling. She had seen his eyes before he empowered the darkness. Just as abruptly, he felt ice form in his palms. It cracked instantly, but was gone before it even reached the table. The fading steam was the only thing left. One of the men on the other table had noticed it.

Vandheer got up from his chair, left the inn, and waited right outside the entry. After a minute or so, the woman came out.

Her eyes were green, and as he had learned by now, it was a common combination with brown hair. Her nails were a bit long and even painted red. She reminded him of someone back in the village.

‘You can’t hide your power.’

Vandheer didn’t answer. He waited for more.

‘So, how many have you brought with you this time? Two, three, four? Or maybe it’s just you, since you’re new.’

He didn’t move. He kept breathing, waiting for her to come with more. He had no idea what kind of troubles this place was in, or what business the woman had with shady people. She still spoke as if it was nothing more but mere hearsay.

‘Anyway… we managed to track down a few of them, though they were in much better shape than I’d allow myself to hope. You’d think the raid had never taken place.’

*A raid?*

‘Just tell me where they are already. I don’t have time for chitchat,’ Vandheer sneered.

‘They? My, you are really misinformed. They split up, and only one of them came here. The man is quite the good one at what he does. He is rarely seen at the same place on the same day. You’d think he is always moving about, but…’

‘Enough. Get back to your own business.’

Without further ado, Vandheer departed from the inn. He had a vague idea of what she was talking about, but he knew nothing of the people that inn keeper kept in touch with. He had no solid evidence, but he had his guesses. The, on second thought, he suddenly remembered that he had no place to stay for tonight, and promptly turned back to her.

Leila had returned to the Sanctum. The High Priestess had summoned her to the highest floor on the western tower. Although it had no official name, it was referred to as the Lookout, as most of the Order’s assailants had been from the west. Many of them had been destroyed from the Lookout as well.

To her surprise, there were others gathered in the Lookout as well. Five others, whose names had faded from Leila’s memory, were seated on the floor, concentrating on something.

‘You arrived just in time, Leila. Come,’ one of the women on the floor said. Without questioning her or the High Priestess’ intentions, Leila went to sit down at the place the woman pointed at, which was right in the middle of the five women. It was only now that she noticed these women’s hands. They were marked with red arrows. They were Seers. Then the High Priestess began speaking.

‘I want you to seek him out, Leila. I summoned you because you have encountered many more life essences in the forms of prophetic visions, and I trust that you will find this man.’

Leila turned around once to look at the High Priestess. She was completely immersed in staring at the expanse beyond Sylus’ walls, westward. Leila looked through the Lookout’s window as total darkness progressively covered her eyes, the High Priestess’ words lingering in her mind.

‘Much depends on you.’

As if she was riding the winds on the wings of a bird, she travelled across the vast expanse that was the world. The ground was lit up, but only to a certain point in which everything beyond was covered by an impervious veil of darkness, rippling as she tore at it, only to find more veils. It was as if she couldn’t see any further than a set distance. She flew past villages, into mountain ranges, beyond great forests and glaciers, all in a constant search for this one essence of dark power in the land covered by shadows. She had probably come across the same places multiple times now, or maybe she had just gone in circles the whole time.

Leila had next to no idea where to search for.

‘Let the darkness consume you, and you will see his tainted shadows,’ the High Priestess’ voice echoed out.

Leila stopped in the expanse of darkness. As she seemingly hovered in midair, the darkness was slowly coming closer to her. Eventually, she couldn’t see anything beyond her own hand, and then it slowly became covered by the darkness as well. It was ethereal, beyond what her mind would have allowed her to imagine. She was sure others might faint out of fear, but she had been through many visions before. This… world, qualified for grave prophecies, and well beyond that.

She turned around, going into many circles. Leila’s eyes searched in every angle as the darkness covered everything she could see.

And then she saw it. The bloodstained shadow tainted the ground, holding a partly hollow sword in its hand. She moved toward it, with only the will of standing in front of the shadow. She felt that the feeling of a world turning upside-down was missing, but it didn’t matter. She had found it. She had found the true darkness, and it was this man, who remained shrouded in it, holding a sword unique to all of its kind.

The power this man possessed was truly a fearsome thing. Leila could feel how his aura twisted the air, infusing it with the essence of his powers, his self.

And then something else came to her.

She could hear screams, cries, sounds of desperation. At the same time, she could hear the shouts of chaos, the incitements of war, murderer and destruction. The darkness around her began to vanish, along with the man’s silhouette. She was suddenly standing in the middle of ashen ruins, in the middle of the night. Burned ruins, ashes and broken belongings were scattered everywhere. Dark blood was spread out across the ground around her. The fires that still lingered in this place were like torches, until Leila noticed how they made no dancing shadows.

She looked up towards the night sky. The moon was in its crescent phase. And then she saw it again – the same aura, the same darkness that lingered in the middle of the crescent moon. And from it, she felt a gaze. A glowing eye opened in the dark hollow of the moon.

Leila felt a pull from behind her, and was removed from the world of darkness in an instant.

‘What did you see, Leila?’ the High Priestess asked calmly.

She was almost breathless, despite the Seers around her using their powers on her. As she heaved for air, she could still feel the gaze from the moon. Leila turned towards the Lookout’s window. She could have sworn that she had seen the edge of the moon – and the dark aura – just before they both faded away.

‘He… the moon is his sun.’

# Lux

V

andheer was sure that this was the place. It had to be.

He had been told that the city of Sylus – home to the Order of Light, the shell of the Sanctum of Light – was a place many felt drawn to. Maybe it was because of the ambient light that gave the city a mysterious glow even in the night, or perhaps just that it was a trade center. It was also a place for any commoner to seek help, counsel, whatever it was that might be needed. The Order was generous to those in difficult situations, and offered help when the darkest of times had dimmed out all hope for a life worth living. Vandheer had only a feeling about this place, but it was more than enough for him. It was plenty, considering that he had learned much just from asking about the Order.

He had stayed here for about a week now. That he had always covered himself in the travelling cloak hadn’t affected anyone in the city. Most people – nobles, merchants, civilians – were focused their own business, and they ranged from obviously wealthy to people who lived day by day, to people who covered themselves entirely in anonymity. Men and women bustled about, nobles surrounded by guards, children lead by people whom Vandheer assumed to be their parents, apprentices and masters carrying materials needed for their craft, merchants shouting and making outrageous claims about the goods they sold, and the occasional entertainers at intersections – he figured that it was quite the lively city.

He had also noticed the members of the Order who had gone outside the Sanctum. They were all women, their age seemingly locked at young adulthood. Many of them were dressed in exclusive clothes, with moderate colors and plenty of decorations. Shawls were a common sight to his eye only after a few days, and the Order obviously had its unwritten code of conduct. Most of the women had tidied their hair in the same fashion – let loose, but without a single strand left alone, or always in bundles – a single entity, never divided.

The Sanctum itself was quite marvelous from the outside, now that he had decided to finally enter it. The inner walls were full of praying civilians, who prayed at certain places around the garden that surrounded the pyramid. The four towers that surrounded the Sanctum pointed north, west, south and east. From what Vandheer had gathered, the Sanctum and the Order were many centuries old, and had endured many conflicts.

The guards at the southern wall had been skeptic about letting him in first – one of them had been interrupted, and with hesitation, called for the gate to be lowered. The inner walls were flowing with magic. The Order made no attempt to hide its powers.

As he came closer to the Sanctum – a great, golden-white pyramid - Vandheer felt something tingling on his skin. He looked at his hand. His shadows were gone, no longer in his control.

Despite the lack of his reassuring shadows, Vandheer kept going. He went to the southeastern entrance. Along the way, he observed the gardens around the Sanctum. Many kinds of flowers and plants had been planted to form equally many patterns and motifs, whilst trees dotted the area, or so it seemed. But along the way, he noticed many of the members looking at him, though not directly. They were all looking through the corner of their eyes. And then he saw it – there were few visitors in here, or more precisely, none other than him.

He kept on going, but when he saw the southeastern entry, Vandheer was completely shocked. A group of ten Sisters, as they were called, stood there. Each one was clothed in a white robe, which hung loosely from most of them.

And they simply stood there, looking at him as he came closer. The moment he passed the first one, the same woman spoke. He stopped dead in his tracks. He knew that the hood only barely covered his hair and eyes. He hadn’t looked at any one of them, but he knew that they had their eyes set on him.

‘Who are you?’

He waited silently.

‘Why are you here?’

‘A feeling called out to me. I came here simply because of that feeling.’

‘Why do you hide yourself?’

‘That is none of your business.’

‘Then come with me.’

‘Why should I…’

He hadn’t reacted before it was too late. One of them had put her hand on his shoulder and removed his hood. The gasps and exclamations around him were just within earshot as he instantly turned towards the woman who had pulled his hood off.

‘Oh my…’

‘By the light of the Aeri…’

She was a staggering sight. She had flaxen hair bundled untidily at the back of her head, sky blue eyes and bright skin – though not as pale as Vandheer’s. She was a beauty, but the somberness in her eyes caught him completely off guard. And then she lifted his chin with her hand, her mouth opening slowly.

‘… Artiphex.’

He tried to move his hand towards her wrist, but his body didn’t obey. He had no idea what was going on, but the distress of losing control of his body was bearable. But only just. As he stood there, however, the woman began toying with him. She moved a bundle of his long, black hair over his shoulder.

‘Raven black hair… eyes red as blood… skin pale as snow – the Wingblade’s heir. We have been searching for you.’

She knew who he was. She knew of his powers.

‘Be at ease… we don’t intend malevolence to you… we just need you.’

She turned around as he stood there, still paralyzed. He could have sworn he had heard her whimper as she whispered, while the other women bound his hands in chains.

‘I’m sorry.’

Out of nowhere, blinding light struck Vandheer’s eyes, only to fade into complete darkness.

He had no idea where he was by the time he woke up, but he could tell that he was sitting on something hard. Someone had put a blindfold on him, and his hands were still chained. That he saw nothing didn’t worry him. What did worry him though, was that his powers were useless against these chains. The moment the chains had been locked to his hands, he had gone through every effort of splitting the chains. These were stronger than the previous ones that had held him, at Narfum.

Vandheer decided to wait before taking any further actions. The echo of footsteps was almost unnoticeable. Light steps, though he had no idea who it could be. The footsteps began circling him in a calm rhythm, without a single variation. He had a vague idea that it was sandals that touched the cold floor.

‘Why have you come here?’ a female voice said. He guessed she was somewhere in her younger adulthood. He recognized that it was someone else than the one who had knocked him unconscious.

‘I had a feeling.’

‘And what do you feel now then?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t play games with me, Artiphex. How does it feel to be enveloped in light?’

Despite that he had a blindfold on him, he felt himself blink. He had no clue what the woman was talking about.

‘How is it to be robbed of darkness?’

He blinked again. As the words sunk into his mind, he slowly realized what had happened back at Elzraei, and what had probably happened thereafter.

‘As if you would understand any of it.’

‘I’ve read accounts and observations of men who lost their powers. Many despaired in their ignorance.’

‘And you think I will?’

‘I will be the one to ask the questions.’

Somewhere in Vandheer’s mind, he could hear the echo of a water drop.

‘Now, who are you, Artiphex? Where are your equals?’

‘Your associates named me “the Wingblade’s heir”, whatever it is that you mean by that.’

Vandheer could have sworn he had heard the woman’s steps come out of rhythm.

The blindfold suddenly fell off. As Vandheer’s eyes adapted to the light around him, he could finally take a look around him. What he saw boded ill.

The floor was probably made of marble, but the black symbols, marks and figures – some hollow, others not – surrounded him in different layers of circles. All of it was rotating around him, every other layer going in the opposite direction. Black air rose around him as well. The layers further away were white instead.

‘You are quite resilient. Or maybe your confidence isn’t founded on your powers. Either way, you will speak,’ the voice said from behind him.

Vandheer could already feel the chains loosen up. They were bending.

‘You will regret your decision if you keep being silent.’

‘I assure you I won’t.’

The moment his wrists were freed, he got up on his feet and turned instantly to face the woman, who was in shock of the flying bits of steel.

She was quite the odd one – white hair and grey eyes, and her skin was almost as bright. It was almost like looking at snow, although her clothes were black, white and yellow. Her beauty did little to deter him from his actions.

As Vandheer flung his hand towards her, fire exploded from his hand. It returned to him, but he managed to wall off the wind coming from the woman by stopping it right where it was. He smashed his fist into the floor, turning the marble floor into a wall as it bended upwards. He backed off immediately, taking a closer look at his surroundings.

They were in a large, four-sided hall. All of it was made of the same white marble, and it was only now Vandheer noticed that the black marks on the ground had vanished completely, at the same time as he felt a surge of power.

‘Fool!’

An unyielding shockwave exploded from wherever the woman was. Large chunks of marble came along with thick, grey dust, some coming dangerously close to Vandheer. That didn’t worry him the least; the real problem was those who had just entered the hall. He could feel their presences – he could tell where they were on the spot. It was as if their silhouettes were visible through everything between them. Reinforcements were no surprise.

What he didn’t expect, was shining needles emerging and piercing his wrists, raising him into the air. And then a sword came out of the dust, its point stopping right in front of his throat. He dared not take a single breath.

‘You underestimate us, Artiphex. Your ancestors taught you nothing, did they?’

As if they had only been invisible, the black symbols that had previously been on the floor, emerged in midair, floating around Vandheer, circling him in different orbits. All of them began shining white, expanding and eventually becoming large things he had never imagined. Some of them were crescents, others were shaped like weapons. He had no idea what was going to happen as he was surrounded from virtually all angles by the white cage of magic.

Was this his end?

‘Stop it, Kryvis!’

The dust settled as Vandheer waited for eternal darkness. At the same time, the deformed marble floor slowly reverted back to its former shape. He could see the sources of the earthen powers. There were eight women in total in the room. He could feel faint sources coming.

‘My apologies, High Priestess,’ one of the women said.

‘Who sent you here?’

Vandheer could already see who was talking through the dust.

‘We came on our own, after the whole sanctum felt an earthquake.

He blinked. Had he really been that careless?

‘Very well. You may leave.’

‘Yes, High Priestess.’

He could only faintly hear the sound of footsteps. Only two remained behind the thin veil of dust. It was the woman at the gates, and the one who had interrogated him – or the High Priestess.

‘Take care of him. He is confused and knows nothing.’

Vandheer blinked again.

‘Tell him what he needs to know,’ the High Priestess said as she exited through the grandiose marble doors.

He landed softly on the ground as the shining needles faded. As they stood there in the grand hall – which had reverted completely to its original shape – he felt the other women’s presences fade away.

‘I’m Leila… Leila Freid.’

Vandheer turned around to the woman he had met at the Sanctum gates. She had an odd air of purity around her. He couldn’t tell if she was really glowing the same way the Sanctum did, but he knew that she, like the Sanctum itself, was not among normal things.

‘Why won’t you say your name?’

‘I have no reason to reveal it.’

‘Then what are your reasons to hide it?’

‘I’d like to know why you have brought me here first, and why you did it by force.’

‘Will you be asking many questions?’

‘If you stop, I might take the opportunity to do so.’

‘Then let me know your first name, so that I can address you.’

He looked into her eyes as they turned to each other. He could have sworn he could see some sort of darkness surrounding her small pupils, but it was gone the moment he claimed to have seen it. Leila’s gaze was unwavering. She returned his stare.

‘My name is Vandheer.’

‘And what is your surname?’

‘Irrelevant.’

‘Then tell me what is relevant.’

The woman turned around, moving her hand in the air. Bright, fiery symbols in the air appeared as she moved, eventually setting themselves into the halls’ walls. He recognized a few symbols, which were among ancient languages. Nothing happened, even when the symbols had become burned into the walls, shining white. He waited.

Leila turned back to him, catching his gaze. A sudden pain hit him in the stomach. He felt like vomiting, but all that came out of his mouth was his own saliva. He heaved for air as he closed his eyes. The pain almost blinded him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he heard the woman say.

Vandheer had intended to show her a vicious stare, but the sight of his own saliva caught his eyes. It was black. What horrified him was that it was expanding across the floor, transforming the hall into a veil of darkness. It faded away as he got up on his feet. He looked around himself, and spotted Leila somewhere in the area.

He recognized this place immediately. She had taken him back to the Black Mountains, back into the past, to where it all had happened.

‘Why have you taken me here?’ he sneered. Leila only turned around, walking towards the distant fires that lit up the smoke in the air. She vanished behind the trees and bushes. Vandheer followed her, but suddenly found himself in the middle of the village. He had drifted along the ground like the wind.

He could see the invaders. They hadn’t noticed him. Without a moment’s hesitation, he flung fire at every single one of them.

Nothing happened. No matter what he did, they remained untouched. Even as he tried to hit one of them with his bare hands, his fist went right through the invader as if he was nothing but air. Their open mouths were silent, despite all the screams that his mind missed.

What happened next was beyond comprehension to him. Parts of the village faded into black holes. Even as he moved around, those holes were always at the same places in his vision. The village itself wasn’t disappearing –Vandheer’s own vision was fading into darkness. Just when he thought that he had gone blind, everything around him turned into something completely different.

He was back in the forest, where he had become the last man alive. It was the same thing all over again. The blue fires that secured his escape covered everything, transforming the forest into ashes.

‘You are the only one left?’

Vandheer heard Leila’s stressed voice, but he had no idea where it came from. The ashes were vanishing – everything was turning even darker.

‘What if I am?’

No one answered him. Instead he was greeted by the hall where the king of Elzraei had forced him to read a paper which proclaimed his duty, however hazy it was. He saw the dark winds drifting through the windows above, surrounding the spot where he had been standing.

It was only now that Vandheer realized what the arms of darkness had done. The darkness that had enveloped him had reached out at everyone in the hall. They had penetrated everyone directly in the body, purging their existence by removing them from reality - at least, most of those in the hall.

‘What was that?’ he heard Leila ask.

The throne hall was slowly fading into the Sanctum hall. By the time everything was back to normal, Vandheer could see the last symbols turn into their now common color – black.

The moment they vanished, the pain in his stomach returned, but this time it didn’t allow him to breathe. It moved higher. He dropped on his knees, grabbing his throat. Dark air came out of his mouth. He didn’t react to the vague sound of footsteps and a female voice in panic. He felt his eyes turn wet. Everything turned into a shade of red. His spit came drooling out of his mouth, but it was black.

*Kill…*

Vandheer tried to look around for whatever it was that he had just heard. The pain immediately knocked him down on the ground again.

*Kill them all!*

He felt someone lift his chin. He could feel that his eyes were closed, but blinding light still struck his eyes, as if his eyelids were nonexistent. He drifted into oblivion.

Vandheer couldn’t see anything when he opened his eyes. He felt them open, yet he didn’t see anything but complete and utter darkness. He was probably on a bed, if his other senses were still intact.

He tried to get up, but his body disobeyed him, as if he was no longer the master of his own body. Then he realized that an arm was on top of his body, restraining him. He felt weak.

‘Rest, Vandheer.’

It was Leila.

‘What have you done to me?’

‘Put you back in safe environments. No other room in the Sanctum is as dark as this one, or as empty in light, at the moment. You need to rest.’

‘What happened in the hall? Did you…’

‘I suppressed the darkness within you while your past was unveiled to me. It still got out of my control… I’m sorry.’

Vandheer tried to move his fingers. At least they were still in his control. He could hear Leila’s breathing, in the darkness. His own was just as audible. Somehow, he didn’t feel angered. He figured it had something to do with the tone in Leila’s voice.

‘This is all very sudden, but… the High Priestess wants you to stay here for a while.’

‘How did you weaken me?’ Vandheer asked.

‘You know little about magic, don’t you?’

‘I can handle it at least.’

Vandheer felt somewhat restful, but not at peace. He had never had this odd feeling before.

Leila couldn’t help being somewhat afraid in this darkness, as she sat on the bed, right next to him. Even though she had been raised in the Sanctum, always reminded to never fear the darkness, this was something entirely different. She had been taught that wherever there is light, there is darkness, and the other way around. The latter seemed farfetched, now that she knew what kind of environment it was that made Vandheer recover easier.

‘The High Priestess doesn’t want you to go outside the Sanctum. If you want to, you must bring me with you.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

Leila turned her head, but saw nothing. Even though it was just dark in the room, the air felt heavy to her. She couldn’t think clearly.

‘She wants me to escort you.’

‘I am perfectly capable of protecting myself.’

‘That is not the point. You don’t know this place.’

‘Does she fear something about me?’

‘Nobody knows what it is that she fears. Do you feel better, now?’

He didn’t answer. Leila imagined the other Sisters calling him *Wingblade*. Most of them would avoid addressing him by his name, title or anything that included details. They would refer to him through indirect means.

‘A bit.’

Leila had read much on the kind of power this man possessed. At least, of what there was to read, she had read most of it. The mere thought of what Vandheer could achieve with the smallest amount of effort should have scared her much more than it did. To see him not utilize his powers at all sent shivers up her back.

‘What are you?’ Vandheer asked.

Although Leila didn’t see him when she turned her head to him, she could swear she felt his gaze. Maybe it was because she had blinked, or perhaps she had seen something at the moment she was opening her eyes again.

‘I am an apprentice.’

‘Why would this… High Priestess, want *you* to accompany me?’

Leila took a deep breath. He asked questions she had been told to avoid answering, yet there were things she had to reveal to him. Was this one of them?

‘There are those of us who are more or less suited for looking after you.’

‘And you are one of the few strong enough to keep me in place?’

‘I am one of the few who know your power.’

‘Yet you do not fear me.’

She blinked once he said that.

‘It won’t be long until I’m done with my studies.’

‘Will you know my powers like the back of your hand, by then?’

‘That would depend. You are part of my studies, in a way.’

Leila didn’t know why she kept answering him so directly. He had such an odd air to him – it was as if it didn’t matter what she said to him. He kept asking and she kept answering. She decided to turn it around.

‘What are you seeking?’ Leila asked.

Out of nowhere, a small flame flashed in front of Leila. She covered her eyes as they slowly adapted to the dim light.

She looked into Vandheer’s eyes. She couldn’t tell what color his eyes were, with this lighting, but she could have sworn she saw a flash of *something*. It didn’t help that he was looking at the ceiling either. His hair was rather peculiar as well. Of all the people she had seen, no one had hair as dark as his. No one had occasional red strands or such pale skin either.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Don’t you feel anything?’

‘All I can feel is how your presence diminishes my power.’

Leila blinked again. Did he feel his power constantly? Was he always in touch with it?

‘And I don’t mean you specifically.’

She blinked. She made one discovery after another. She knew the High Priestess would want to know anything as soon as possible, but there was a time for everything.

‘What powers do you possess?’ Vandheer asked. His eyes almost locked her own.

Leila paused for a moment, clearing her throat. Was this something he had to know? It wouldn’t hurt either way, if he learned.

‘The Order is characterized by a power which appears in most gifted women… we call it Light. However, we also possess others. Some possess destructive powers such as fire, while others can enchant that which already exists. Few are able to gain other powers…’

‘And you are among those few.’

‘Yes. I… am also a student of ancient powers. That is how I kept the darkness from hurting you, back in the hall. When your saliva turned black, I realized I couldn’t hold it back on my own.’

‘So what did you do, then?’

‘I lost control, so it… whatever colored your saliva, took control of the vision,’ she said, concern lingering in her voice.

‘So the black air I breathed was caused by the same thing?’

‘I guess so.’

Someone knocked on the door. Leila’s gaze was still locked to Vandheer’s eyes. He had such… capturing features. It was only now she noticed how her hand was on Vandheer’s blanket, on top of where his chest was. She could almost feel his warmth through it.

But there was something about that feeling on her hand that wasn’t quite right.

‘Come in.’

Leila could see that the person who just entered was surprised by the fact that there was light in the room, even by the slightest amount.

‘I thought you were supposed to not light up this room, Leila.’

‘I didn’t do it.’

Rayne was by all means a disciplined person, which Leila had experienced in her younger years, when Rayne had been among her instructors. She was among the few who the High Priestess had full faith in, and was one of the notably beautiful women in the Sanctum. She was about as tall as a man, but her body was smooth and curved. In spite of many offering to become her sentinel, she had rejected every single man who had come to her, offering their service. From what Leila knew, she deemed all of them unfit one way or the other. Some were lustful, others not suited for her personality, or her tastes. A few were potential candidates, but she had blankly turned down even sentinels who were wanted by several Sisters.

As a result, she had cut her hair short. Some thought she had gone mad, with her good looks, but her brain was untouched by both the rumors and her own actions. Her hair wasn’t as blonde as Leila’s, and her eyes were as green as grass. The woman’s hair couldn’t even be combed – it was just a bit shorter than the length of an average man’s hair.

‘So, his name is Vandheer.’

‘You don’t have to pretend that I’m not awake,’ he said.

Leila already had an idea of what Rayne had come for. She was one of the others the High Priestess had taken under her command.

‘Rayne.’

‘Leila, I think he has recovered as much as he can here, by now. His environment is not one for true recovery, so it would be better to bring him out.’

‘So, you have…’

‘The others are reading as we speak. The High Priestess wants us all to remain informed, so you might as well come.’

Leila got up from the bed. So, the High Priestess took no chances.

‘But we can’t let Vandheer stay here alone…’

‘Exactly. I’ll remain here.’

Her heart stopped beating for a second. Although Rayne had a good reputation, Leila wasn’t sure of how well Rayne could handle outsiders. She had never been outside the Sanctum, for as long as Leila could remember. And most probably, she hadn’t read *that* book either, but Leila had no choice. She went to the door. She whispered one last thing before Rayne closed the door for her.

‘Be gentle, Rayne.’

All she got for an answer was an almost unnoticeable nod.

The corridors were quiet in this part of the Sanctum. This was one of the higher parts, but that wasn’t the reason for why it was suddenly deserted. As she went towards the High Priestess’ quarters, she heard chitchat concerning the earthquake, and the “empty place”. It was unavoidable, but it had been necessary.

As she ascended the white marble stairs, she saw some of the others that the High Priestess had picked. She recognized some, but she didn’t know any of them quite well. But most of them had their reputations.

The most notable one, just in front of Leila, was Xena Lufar, the elder sister of Kryvis Lufar. The two were among the strongest in the Order, and yet, neither one of them had reached their full potential, despite that they were finished with their studies many years ago. Leila had heard many rumors about the sisters’ relationship with each other, but they were rarely seen together.

Some speculated that they had fought each other once while they were apprentices, wounding each other greatly, and not just physically.

‘How odd to see you here, Leila.’

Leila was taken aback, as Xena Lufar turned around.

‘What does an apprentice of dusty old tomes have to do with the High Priestess?’

She ignored her subtle insult, and kept walking up the stairs.

‘I wouldn’t know.’

‘Then know this, *apprentice*,’ Xena said, keeping a firm grip on Leila’s shoulder. She turned around. Something in her mind told her that she should have been afraid, but she wasn’t. She could only stare blankly into the green emeralds that were Xena’s eyes.

‘Don’t get in my way.’

‘I won’t, Sister Xena.’

They walked side by side up the stairs, in complete and utter silence, while the others around them acted like they hadn’t noticed Xena and Leila.

Even though there were unofficial ranks within the Order, there were some apprentices who were stronger than full Sisters. Often, these apprentices had a great potential, but they were very few in number. Some of them were simply different as well. Leila had a vague idea of where she was on the ladder. Otherwise, a high-ranking Sister wouldn’t speak to her in such a manner.

They arrived at the doors. Although Leila had already seen it multiple times now, the doors were still just as wondrous. The engraved scenes reminded her of prophecies yet to come, and some that had been fulfilled. Among the scenes were great battles, people reading books, a sovereign commanding his subjects, and executions. Some were more abstract, with no obvious purpose other than decorating the entry to the High Priestess’ residence. As they waited in front of it, a few more Sisters arrived at the top of the stairs. Some went off in other directions halfway, to other floors.

As if the doors reacted to their arrival, they opened the moment everyone had come to the top of the stairs. A young man held the doors open, inviting them in with his free hands. Leila could feel how the air was distorted around him. She paid no further attention to him – it wasn’t unusual for the Order to keep strange people under its ceiling.

‘Come in. She is waiting.’

It was already midnight, but the ambient light kept the High Priestess’ residence lit. Leila was fully conscious of whose light it was.

Much like the *Aevihn*’s own residence – which now left to her servant, a shy, lonesome girl Leila didn’t know much about – the first room was a garden. The green patch of grass was in the shape of a square, just like the garden. Every surface was made of pure, white marble. The only difference between the *Aevihn*’s and the High Priestess’ quarters that Leila knew about was a prayer room.

The High Priestess was walking back and forth, seemingly holding something in her right hand. They stepped into the room, kneeling on one leg until the High Priestess redirected her attention to them.

She had changed clothes, and was now dressed in a white robe with somewhat long sleeves. Lines of red decorated her, almost looking like bloodstains, but the color was much too strong for that. Yet, it made her seem all the more alive.

Xena Lufar initiated the conversation.

‘We await your command, High Priestess.’

The High Priestess inspected them from a distance, Light glowing dimly from her. Leila could have sworn that the High Priestess’ clothes seemed to darken.

‘I presume that all of you have a vague idea of where Light is now absent…’

The Light around her strengthened slightly.

‘I will not allow anyone to come within ten feet of him at any time, save for the following: Leila Freid, Xena and Kryvis Lufar, and Rayne Oreithon. Anyone who disobeys this order will be severely punished. Exile is an option if you do not obey. If you desire to come close to him, you will do so only with the permission of those I have mentioned, and you will not provoke that man in any way whatsoever. I know the rumors have reached your ears, and I will not have them give you any ideas.’

Kryvis immediately responded.

‘High Priestess, I cannot believe who he is. This is madness – he can’t be the Wingblade’s heir! Why should we even–’

The High Priestess wore a mask of anger. Leila knew that it was actually worse.

‘Did you not see what he did in the Chamber of Illusions as you came, binding him in chains? Do you not realize how powerful he is, when not even Leila Freid cannot hold him?’

‘How can she possibly be strong in Light? She is just–’

‘She is the only one who can ever *hope* to control him, Kryvis Lufar! One word from your mouth, and I will have you exiled at this instant!’

Complete silence occupied the room instantly, not faltering even as the High Priestess’ threatening glare faded. Leila could see that everyone was looking at Kryvis, who had gone down on both knees, bowing. No one moved as the High Priestess’ usual, composed voice eventually filled the air.

‘Leave, Xena. And take your sister with you. I suggest that you make an arrangement between the two of you.’

The fact that the High Priestess had not spoken to Kryvis directly only served to show how the she regarded her. Even the High Priestess could be harsh, in the most subtle ways. This, however, was not intended to be subtle, nor was it. She continued once the Lufar sisters left the room.

‘As you just learned, Leila is not yet fully capable of her task. Assist her reasonably, but note that she is the one in charge of keeping his powers on a tight rein. As such, you will listen to anything she has to say. Don’t let your pride fool you.’

In the silence, Leila was sure everyone else was relating that last statement to Kryvis. Poor woman. Even though she felt offended, Leila didn’t blame Kryvis for her insult. Almost no one knew of Leila’s abilities. No one quite knew who it was who supervised her either, as Leila was very capable of studying on her own now. In a way, it was for her own good, though it was mostly to protect everyone *but* her.

‘Whatever disputes it is that you have between each other, you will banish them, or set them aside until I no longer demand it. Are my orders clear?’

All as one, they almost chanted the words. ‘Yes, High Priestess.’

‘Any questions, before you leave?’ the High Priestess asked.

One of the Sisters cleared her voice. Veran, one of the elder ones, was among them. Most of the gathered ones had lived a lifetime already.

‘Will we share our knowledge, or will you set certain… restrictions?’

‘In time, there will be.’

Veran nodded silently, eyes closed, and withdrew from the High Priestess’ residence. One after the other, the Sisters either asked a question or left as another was answered. When the last one had departed, Rayne came in. Leila still had a question to ask of the High Priestess.

‘Is he awake?’ the High Priestess asked.

It was only now that Leila noticed that the void of Light had faded away. It was odd, to finally feel a place not filled with Light.

‘Yes. Interestingly, he can feel Light. He is, from what I can tell, at least as sensitive to it as we are, and by that, I mean the stronger ones in the Order.’

The High Priestess, though she was also doing her part, looked at Leila. So, it was just the three of them?

‘He told me that directly to me before Rayne came in. Nonetheless… he is, as I presumed, a keeper of other strengths. He can create fire, as he lit up the room by himself, though it was the size of a candle flame.’

The High Priestess turned around, hands behind her back, looking up towards the hole in the roof where the source of the absent light, rested.

‘Did you learn more about him?’

Leila was fully aware of what she really meant. Rayne was not lacking in knowledge either – she was among Leila’s former instructors.

‘He is the last of his kind. The late King of Elzraei was exterminated when he took Vandheer in for interrogation, I believe.’

‘And what is the worst of it?’

Leila took a moment to find the right words. There were none.

‘Not even I am capable of subduing him. At least, I cannot do it alone.’

As she expected, the High Priestess turned around immediately, with a grave expression on her face. It was then she realized that the High Priestess really had acquired the knowledge she needed.

‘I’m requesting much from you two, but will you instruct Leila again, Rayne?’

In her mind, Leila quietly wished that the High Priestess hadn’t said those words. Rayne turned around without answering or making any commotion, or even any signal. The doors closed in a perfectly normal manner behind her. Leila heard the High Priestess turn to face the door just as Rayne’s shortcut hair vanished behind white marble doors.

Leila did not expect to see the High Priestess sighing. Suddenly, she looked like any other kind of apprentice, with the exception of having a more composed stature and clothing. She held her hand up to her forehead, eyes closed.

‘I trust you, Leila.’

She almost jumped.

‘And it is mostly because I have to. Come here.’

The High Priestess went to sit down under the source of the ambient light. She didn’t sit directly beneath it, and signaled for Leila to come. Leila sat down next to her.

‘How long have you studied and lived with the Order?’

She pondered for a moment, recalling events from the past.

‘I came when I was a little girl, about five years old. My eyes were said to glow, but not with that yellow or white light, instead they glittered blue, just like my eye color.’

The High Priestess touched Leila’s cheek, and they turned their heads to face each other. Leila touched the power that she had first encountered. The High Priestess’ nodding confirmed that her eyes had just sparkled slightly.

‘My parents were poor, and decided that I would be better off here. Afterwards, they visited year after year.’

‘Please tell me what you studied.’

Although Leila hadn’t been aware of her straying from her explanation, she was surprised by the High Priestess. She hadn’t sounded displeased, or even provoked. A Sister would be ashamed.

Was she revealing herself to Leila?

‘To begin with, it was Light. When my other strengths and potentials were eventually found, my former studies became less of a priority. I went over to focus on my other powers, looking at tomes with purposes long forgotten, and when I was seventeen, I was introduced to prophecy. I was done with Light last year, and so, I’ve… been through a lot more than I previously could. But my ability to suppress others’ strength is practically useless, the way it is.’

‘Why is that?’

Leila let out an audible sigh, and closed her eyes and she breathed.

‘To suppress men is an entirely different thing. Thanks to him, I just discovered that. I don’t know anyone who has ever done it.’

‘You actually do.’

She almost jumped again.

‘Rayne was one of the more requested Sisters. She used to cooperate with some Anzareth we have, including the one who guards my door. I couldn’t force her on any more missions, as she had discovered some things that disturbed her. Something was done to her, as well. Her glow went from white to grey.’

*Grey?*

Leila had to see this for herself.

‘She had no desire to go outside the Sanctum ever since. She tends to come here to sit on this patch of grass, instead of the Great Garden.’

*She wants to be alone.*

‘I cannot ask anything of her either. In a way, I am indebted to her.’

‘Why am I the one to learn about your life, High Priestess?’

Leila turned her head to see the woman pondering, as she looked at the grass. The High Priestess rose, walking quietly on bare feet towards what Leila presumed to be the prayer room. She waited quietly until the white-haired woman returned. She was holding something in her left hand, and opened it – it was a perfectly clear rhombus crystal, but it was hollow. It was completely transparent, colorless.

‘You will need this. Rayne was once powerless, before she learned how to suppress men. With this, you should be safe while she teaches you.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘I don’t know. I owe her too much to ask for anything.’

Vandheer exhaled, listening to the sound of bubbles drifting towards the surface of the warm water. It wasn’t too different from cold water.

He had been surprised by the fact that they had an outdoor bath *inside* the Sanctum. Somehow, even the plants had no problem growing without sunlight. He had no idea why they had a bath for men either. The wall that separated the halves extended all the way to the walls, but he could still hear voices. Then again, the wall didn’t reach the ceiling either.

The thought of making these baths a habit, was tempting, but the conversations that he overheard concerned topics he had little interest in. Some of them were outright disturbing to him, as a man.

He broke the water surface, and swung his hair. Whatever it was that he could hear from the other side of the wall, the voices silenced as the water from his hair rained on the bath water. He inhaled deeply, and touched his hair. He had let it grow over many years. Somehow, every time someone had cut it without him wanting his hair cut, his hair reverted to its former length every full moon. It had taken about a year before someone had noticed how his hair didn’t change. He used to have short hair, until he had wanted to let it grow. A few months later, Vandheer had noticed a strand of red hair in his bed. Some years later, he had gained streaks of red. He exhaled, his breath being quite audible.

As if it suddenly became alive, the water started moving around him. At first, it was just ripples, minor waves. Waves emerged, collapsing upon each other. The waves started turning in the middle, rising, rotating around straight beams of water that rose slowly into the air. The rotation accelerated – the composition was made more and more complex. Whirlwinds of water were formed.

Thin beams of water rose close to him. They eventually reached his body, crawling along his arms, and extended from his body like vines. The water separated in the middle, splitting the bath water in two halves, the middle being completely cleared of water.

The dancing water on both halves clashed into each other as the two halves were reassembled. The waterspouts disassembled as the rotation slowed down, while the dancing shapes of water collapsed into each other, splashing and eventually reassembling into still, hot water.

It was only now that Vandheer noticed that several women surrounded him by the edges of the pool. Each and every woman was stone-faced, even though Vandheer’s upper body was completely bare. He had seen such faces many times before, but if anything, he wouldn’t have expected this from the women of the Order.

The only flustered one among them was Leila. He figured that it was partly due to her age, and the fact that the Sanctum housed almost no men. Fortunately, his lower body was covered by a wet towel.

‘Vandheer… what was that, just now?’

He looked calmly into her eyes. For a moment, it seemed like he was coming closer to those sky blue gems.

‘What do you make of it?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m certain that no one does that kind of thing.’

He held her gaze. Only once did her eyes stray from him.

‘Come out of the water,’ one of the other women said.

Vandheer moved slowly towards Leila, who stood right in front of the bath’s entry. Her eyes moved away from him a second time.

*Does she fear me?*

He could have sworn he saw a drop of sweat before one of the Sisters stopped him from being at arm’s length of Leila.

‘You haven’t answered her question. What did you do?’

He waited, holding the woman’s eyes locked with his own. He had expected her reaction – his red eyes unsettled her.

‘I don’t know,’ Vandheer replied quietly, and brushed her aside. He looked at Leila.

*As usual, Vandheer was left out once again. While everyone seemed to be joyous about the celebration, he had, of course, not been disturbed by anything. At least, that was the way others put it.*

*As he often did, he went off to the pond in the northeast. It was one of the few places where he could release himself, even though it was common to visit the place. Somehow though, it had become his place. He didn’t know why people had stopped going for a walk up here, but then again, wherever he was, most people decided to stay away.*

*He exhaled heavily as he sat down on a rock right next to the pond. It wasn’t any big – he could easily throw a pebble across twice the pond’s length. He had come here many times, and in summer he bathed here. There were few places he found time to be not just alone, but away from people.*

*People who avoided him like wildfire.*

*Vandheer shut everything away from his mind, and released that which he always had to restrain. He opened his eyes.*

*The water was dancing. Waves and arms of water rose from the surface. They met, collapsed, and rose again as simple shapes. Even the surface changed, some places growing deeper, and the pond was even split in the middle. The two halves met, and from that point a beam of water came, shooting into the air, as if the pond had become a fountain.*

*It was only now that he noticed the shadow that was covering him and his own shadow. He turned around.*

Leila had completely different eyes, Vandheer concluded. She didn’t look away this time.

‘Why do you also have red hair?’

Those strands must have been glistening with all the water in his hair. He didn’t mind telling her the story behind it.

‘Never mind that, Leila – bring him out of there,’ a voice called. Vandheer recognized it as the High Priestess’ voice.

He went to the men’s wardrobe, and – to his surprise – found a new set of clothes. The disturbing thing was how familiar it was, to his eye. They were too similar to those that he could only remember, from the village. He could feel the water leave his hair as he removed the towel. He could see why this outfit had been given to him, as the air in front of him reflected himself. A hooded, black robe with diagonal white streaks all over, blood red shawl, even sandals – it reminded him of the clothes Sharon had given him. The shawl was about as long as a scarf.

‘Vandheer?’

It was Leila. She was taking very slow steps. When she came, she had her left hand covering her eyes, even though Vandheer was already dressed up again. He let the reflection vanish.

‘What is it?’ he asked quietly. He didn’t mind her coming, as long as she covered her eyes. For some reason, he felt calm. Maybe it had to do with how he considered her completely different from any other woman he had ever met.

‘The High Priestess awaits you in the Chamber of the Light.”

‘You even name rooms like that?’

‘You wouldn’t understand why.’

He waited. Leila was completely silent. She didn’t even flinch, even though she probably thought that he had stopped putting on his clothes.

‘You can uncover your eyes now.’

She let her hand drop, and her eyes widened. Was he really that remarkable?

‘Your hair… how did you dry it so swiftly?’

‘I removed the water,’ Vandheer replied. He had expected this to be a common thing, particularly in the Sanctum.

‘Oh. I’ll lead the way. And put your hood on.’

Vandheer closed the door to the wardrobe, and followed Leila through the corridors. The paintings, carvings and ceiling were all of the same type. Every single one of the decorations was a depiction of some scenery, with some elements reappearing over and over again. The one thing that never left any decoration was a symbol, was a winged short sword with a shield.

‘Is this the Order’s crest?’ he asked Leila, pointing at a painting. She gave it a look, and shook her head.

‘It used to be. Now, it’s without the shield, and the sword is stabbed into a pedestal.’

‘Why is that? And why do I have to put the hood on?’

‘I haven’t read much about it. It’s not what I study. As for the hood, it’s a custom.’

Vandheer gave it no further thoughts as they stopped right in front of a large double door. In contrast to many of the doors he had seen in the Sanctum so far, this one was not decorated in any way whatsoever. Leila pushed open the left part of the white door, leading him on.

This was by far not what he had in mind.

The Chamber of the Light was the largest hall he had ever seen. The ceiling was far above, and the sheer width and length of the hall was stunning. A gigantic tribune with no unoccupied seats was up ahead, and in the middle of it, there was another entry. He could see gold on it, from this distance. He could hear chatter coming from the tribune, and it ended when the entry on that side was opened. The doors grated as they split open for the High Priestess. The chatter among the Sisters on the tribune died swiftly. As the High Priestess walked on, she stopped at an elevated platform in front of the tribune. Leila led Vandheer closer, until they were only ten steps apart from the High Priestess.

She had come simply dressed – a white robe with large sleeves, and a circlet on her head. Her white hair was gathered at her neck. Vandheer was certain that her circlet was enchanted. The way the light seemed to form a circle around the circlet gave it away.

Vandheer could feel how light seemed to envelop him completely, how the tribune almost radiated. But the High Priestess… she glowed. By the abyss, she was *glowing*.

‘Whatever it is that she says, answer her, and with honesty,’ Leila whispered from behind. He figured the circlet made lies as apparent as fire was hot.

The silence remained undisturbed for a short moment, after both of the entry doors stopped grating.

‘Vandheer Nillis… is that your name?’ the High Priestess asked.

For no reason whatsoever, his arms tensed. He soon realized that he was not prepared for any of this.

‘That… is correct.’

Gasps and denials were quite audible, even from this distance. He could feel the light around him weaken.

‘Why have you come here, Artiphex of the Named?’ The title only served to confuse him.

‘I felt... a calling. Something drew me here.’

‘Have you found what you seek, heir of the Wingblade? If not, what is it that you seek?’

Vandheer remained completely silent as he felt the light around him fade into nothingness. He could feel how he was covered in shadows, under his hood.

‘I do not know what it is that I seek… High Priestess.’

‘Lies! High Priestess, that man is lying!’ a voice from the tribune called. Vandheer could see the person who had just shouted, standing where she was supposed to sit.

He let go of the restraint.

Slowly, whatever candles that were lit in the hall, were snuffed out. The ambient light weakened into dim lighting, until a burst of light exploded in the middle of the hall.

‘Is this a demonstration of your power, Vandheer Nillis?’

‘Demonstration?’

Vandheer chuckled. He lost it, and laughed like he never had before.

‘High Priestess, you don’t know the half of it. I would go as far as saying that you are in the *dark*.’

He breathed deeply, amplifying his voice so everyone in the hall could hear. He chuckled again. Whatever light there was now, it dimmed again.

‘I just released it. I did nothing.’

Vandheer saw someone faint on the tribune. He had no idea why it made him smile.

‘High Priestess, this *Wingblade* you speak of,’ Vandheer began. He heard gasps and quiet comments from the tribune. Apparently he was actually supposed to only answer. ‘To whom, am I the heir? Why is it that the Sisters of Light fear a single man so much, when all he does is dim the lights?’

He swept his eyes across the tribune. He could have sworn that he met every pair of eyes.

‘Or is it that you fear that your light may vanish… for eternity?’

A piercing scream came from the tribune, this time. He could almost smell the fear. Although it was only slightly visible, he could see how the High Priestess reacted at his question. Even she couldn’t escape the fear.

‘Who are you, Vandheer Nillis? What do you think about yourself?’ the High Priestess asked.

Vandheer looked up into her eyes. They were grey. Such a hard stare, full of strength and confidence – he had never seen anything like it. A woman worthy of admiration.

Without a single motion, the hood came off his head. He let his hair out behind him, revealing himself to what he assumed to be the bulk of the Order. He held out his right hand in front of him, holding a fire over it as he spoke. It lifted off into the air, moving across the hall without any pattern.

‘I am one of none, the only of my kind. I have eyes of blood, hair of a raven, skin colored by the moonlight. I am a survivor, a remnant, the only one of my kin.’

He let the fire fade.

‘I know only that something is tugging at me, calling for me to come.’

‘Will you accept our aid then?’

The doors behind Vandheer banged open. He turned around, only to be greeted by wind. He turned his eye back to the High Priestess, thinking for a few seconds. He was sure that she was a shrewd woman.

‘What are your compromises, then?’

‘Service to the Order in return of the Light’s aid.’

‘Then we have a fairly open agreement. I like that.’

He went to the opened doors, and turned around just before he decided to close them. The air between him and the High Priestess coiled, twisting itself into invisible shapes.

‘I suppose you have already made some arrangements,’ he whispered. He was not surprised to see her eyes wide open. Just as mysteriously, to her eyes, the doors closed on their own. Leila was looking away, when Vandheer turned towards her. Her eyes were somewhat restless.

‘Vandheer… could you tell me more about yourself, someday?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘I’m just… curious.’

He felt slightly inclined to smile, yet he found himself unable to. He had no idea why he felt either of the feelings.

‘Perhaps.’

# The High Rule

S

haron took another sip of her wine. Despite the fact that the sun was still high up and warming, it remained cold. She had her friends to thank for that. Maybe not friends, more like associates with common interests.

It had been a bit troublesome, to convince the lord of this mansion to let her in. Of course, she could have been more convincing, but she preferred to keep things tidy. Threats were of little use, but a vibrant display of power was enough for any man who feared death. She opened the pocket watch she always carried with her.

Of the three hair straws inside it, one of them was red. She put all three of them in the bowl of water she had requested, and touched the surface of the water as light as a feather. The water vibrated, and slowly, that boy’s eye was on the surface. The eye shrank, and the surface became his face, and hair.

Such a beautiful creature – Sharon had never seen anything that could be compared to him. And that night, when she had him dressed up in that outfit… that had been an experience like no other. She also realized that he really meant what he had said, back in Derenthil. The Nexus was truly gone.

Those red eyes of his… Sharon could feel their gaze. Even as the waving surface showed his whole stature, that unwavering gaze was locked onto her, piercing and looking into her very soul, locking her eyes onto his. She was certain that the boy knew how his eyes inspired fear in others. His white skin and black hair only contributed to his shocking, unfathomable features. And the occasional red strands made him more mysterious than what Sharon could handle. She couldn’t forget him, or keep him out of her mind.

Without noticing anyone knock on the door, it opened. A hand, accompanied by a familiar voice came through.

‘The meeting is going to begin soon, Sharon. Are you ready?’

‘I have nothing I need to bring with me, Elena.’

The woman was blonde, but her eyes were brown. Like Sharon, she was different in her own ways, and most certainly attractive. Aside from such little features, they looked fairly similar. They were both slender in stature, and used every advantage they had, but they had standards though, of course. All in all, she was someone Sharon could trust. Some would have called them friends, and they weren’t too far from being that, but they both knew that it wasn’t possible for them to form any such relationship. They were more like partners, whenever they needed each other’s assistance.

Sharon followed Elena through the dimly lit corridors of the mansion. Sharon was almost amazed at how similar mansions could be, when it came to their looks. Their construction was no different. From knowing one mansion, one could assume how every other would be.

‘Is every country there?’ Sharon asked.

‘Only the ones that seem to be peaceful. The theocracies, the northern empire, three councils, the Union, five clans from the southeast and three kingdoms have showed up. The rest have succumbed to either chaos, or have no leader. Whatever new countries may rise from the ashes of others, have yet to announce any names.’

‘And how about their leaders? Are they all at the Fortress?’

‘Only the queen is absent. She sent her youngest son and her successor, in her stead.’

That surprised Sharon greatly. She had heard rumors about the queen’s daughter, but that she was so closely tied with her younger brother was indeed unexpected.

‘So you have seen every one of them? Anyone worth notice?’

‘It was a formality, naturally, but the party was only for introduction, and making the notable ones distinguished. I managed to speak with everyone, just like last time. Some have changed, most haven’t.’

‘My, so you do have someone around your finger already?’

‘I’ve formed more of a friendship, surprisingly. So, what’s your next question?’

‘What will their discussion be about? For a meeting to be held on such a short notice is quite rare.’

Elena stopped right in her tracks. That meant bad news.

‘It must be something secret. No wonder I couldn’t pry it out of the emperor.’

‘So you even know the emperor.’

‘Unlike you, I don’t *await* men and women of the higher classes. You should do something to make yourself more famous – it’s good for your business, Sharon.’

‘Well, I suppose there is no more that you can tell me. Thank you, Elena.’

‘We will always be in debt to each other, Sharon.’

With a smile, Elena left Sharon, walking elegantly away. The meeting hall wasn’t too far away.

Ever careful, Sharon whispered the words as she came close to an intersection. She was getting close to the meeting hall.

‘*Light forsaken, shadow ridden of; only with the other eye may I be seen.*’

It was just as surprising each time, how light shifted around her. She could see how everything around her became distorted, hazy. When she looked down at where her hand should have been, she saw only the floor. She touched her hair, brought it in front of her, but it had vanished from her sight as well.

Now, she only had to walk as silently as possible while entering the meeting of the High Rule.

The security was tight. There were soldiers in full armor at every intersection, and in the middle of each passage. Even though Sharon would have loved to enjoy the decorations in the hallway, she had to hurry. The doors would soon open.

What greeted her next was completely unexpected. In the entrance, there was a person in a black, hooded cloak. Four others, cladded in grey cloaks instead, surrounded the one in black. They would have looked the same, had it not been for their difference in size. They were all turned towards the door before them. What caught Sharon’s attention, however, were the six corpses lying around them. Blood was spilled everywhere around the five in cloaks, but none of them had been stained.

The doors opened. Sharon only just managed to follow the five through.

She had seen blood, yes. But she had never seen bodies as mutilated as these – on every corpse, there were at least two body parts that had been severed, and not all of them were clean cuts.

‘Who dares to disturb the gathering of the High Rule?’ A voice demanded.

Sharon looked around, as the doors behind her suddenly closed on their own. For once, she felt fear. She had no idea who these five were.

The meeting hall wasn’t grandiose in the slightest. It was round, and there were about thirty simple chairs at the edge. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, lighting up the room, but only dimly. The walls were not decorated at all – the stones were bare, uncovered. In the middle of the room, there was something on the floor. Sharon couldn’t figure out what it was, but she saw that there were symbols and the like. The floor wasn’t made of stone there either – it was without any cracks.

‘Master, are you certain that these men…’

‘I have no doubts.’

The black one was the leader among them. Sharon wanted to walk in front of them, but she didn’t dare to make a single step. Not only did she have to walk on cold stone floor, but she feared that the five might notice her in other ways than sound. They walked until they were in the middle of the round hall.

She had no idea who these men were. She could feel her fear for them, how her legs barely kept her standing. The one in black walked closer to the one on the opposite side of the door. Sharon saw who it was who sat there – it was the emperor.

‘Rulers among men… the pact that you have made with each other, is crumbling. The High Rule that you speak of, is soon at its end.’

‘What ridiculous nonsense is this? Who are you?’ the emperor shouted.

‘We are but the forerunners of fate, emperor of the north. We are the envoys of our master… the emperor of the Netherworld.’

Sharon hadn’t expected that almost every one of the men present at the meeting suddenly stood up on their feet – a man on the left whom she recognized as a clan chief spoke.

‘Foolishness! How did you even get in here, you madmen…’

The clan chief’s voice faded away as one of the men in grey, the one on the right and behind the leader, removed his hood.

Sharon almost lost her footing. Half of the man’s head was shaved, and the hair on the left half was dark blue. What she didn’t understand though, was why his hair moved as if it was in water. The man lifted his right hand, and from it, ice grew into the air and onto the floor.

The hood fell off from the one in front of the blue-haired man. His head was shaved in an intricate pattern that Sharon recognized as wings, but tattered ones. Wind came out of nowhere. Snow began whirling around the room, and soon enough, some of the men seated around the room were marked with despair. And Sharon stood completely still.

‘That is enough, Erendur, Jah’kar. Humans forget many things, as short as their lifespan is, but humans do not forget to *fear*. That… is the only thing they inherit.’ The leader walked closer to the emperor, holding his left hand to his side.

‘Despite their weak bodies and even frailer minds, they somehow keep on existing. Running away and hiding must be among your greatest abilities, if not *the* greatest ability you humans have. But tell me, emperor… can you run away from *this*?’

The leader unveiled himself. He tossed off his cloak, revealing something Sharon could never have imagined.

She had been entirely wrong about them being men. They were *monsters*. The one in front of the emperor was a monstrosity – tattered wings of skinless flesh and bone growing out from his back, right arm stripped of skin as well, but with a blade made out of bone, sticking out from his forearm. The blade grew violently in a single second to the size of a longsword. From the creature’s head, a twisted, bloodstained white horn grew out on the left side.

She wanted to leave immediately, and pretend that this had never happened. The men around in the hall screamed as they tried to run along the edge of the round hall, to the exit. Yet, Sharon already knew that it was futile. These monsters were far from normal. The door was frozen, and the cold emanated from behind her. She could feel how unnaturally cold her back was. The screams of men behind her kept deafening her ears, until the sound of pierced flesh reached her. The sudden yelps of death were quiet.

‘Even if you did escape, it would be futile, for the only thing that awaits you behind these doors…’ the monster’s voice faded with loathing, as he raised his blade of bone. ‘Is death.’

‘Then what is your intention with us, you monster!’ the emperor shouted. Sharon did not see a speck of fear on him, which made her wonder if that man was a fool gone over his head.

‘That is for you to decide…’

And then the monster turned around to face the doors. He looked right through Sharon. For a moment though, she could have sworn that he had seen her. The monster’s right jaw was skinless – she could see the insides of his mouth, and his wicked, sharp teeth.

Suddenly, the ice behind Sharon exploded – shards of ice and snow scattered everywhere in the hall, even the shattered carcasses of the ones who had tried to escape, only to die by spikes of ice. Sharon closed her eyes. She hoped it would end soon. The barrier she had formed vanished as quickly as she had made it.

‘Well, emperor… what will you do, as we rampage through this fortress? What will you do, knowing that you are utterly powerless? Answer me!’

Sharon could only hear anxious breathing. And then the emperor’s voice came.

‘If I cannot do anything, then I will summon those who can.’

She heard quiet, rhythmic footsteps. She figured it was one of those in grey cloaks. She had not expected a female voice though.

‘An interesting answer, emperor of the north. So you mean to say, that… there are someone here of true power? Among you humans?’

‘No one would submit to fiends such as you.’ A grunt came after the emperor expressed his ill will towards the five.

‘So, emperor… would you rather… *die*?’

The sound of ripped flesh and death through was inescapable. Sharon felt a tear crawling down her cheek. She wanted to get out. She opened her eyes, and turned around immediately. It didn’t help – the image of the emperor’s mutilated body was burned into her memory already. At least the man had the mercy of being struck at the throat first.

‘My, but their heads do come off easily.’

Whichever one of them it was who said that, that person said it as if it was one of the most casual things to talk about in the world. Sharon quietly walked through the open doors that had exploded along with the ice. She did not dare to turn around to see what would happen with the rest. She had to leave immediately. Where she would go, was not a concern.

‘How do you feel?’

Vandheer was sitting perfectly still on one of the patches of grass inside the Sanctum, eyes closed, legs crossed, hands on his knees. Somehow, such spaces where sunlight came through were scattered everywhere. He figured that the building itself was enchanted in many ways.

Leila had woken him up and, as he expected, brought some clothes that made him very distinguishable. It was already impossible for him to blend in with any crowd, so he didn’t see why they needed to make his clothes stand out as well. Although they were loose-fitting and rather comfortable, he couldn’t help thinking that they made his looks only more ominous.

Long black hair, blood-red eyes, snow-white skin, and then this – a black robe, white cloak billowing behind him, and a red shawl hanging from his neck out in front of him. He didn’t even have a say in choosing his clothes.

‘Not any different.’

‘I was hoping that I wouldn’t have to use the other methods…’

‘Such as?’

‘Come. I’ll explain it to you while we walk down there.’

Vandheer walked right behind her, only an arm’s length away. The looks he received from those they passed varied – some gave away their fear, while others were simply taken aback. He knew that he had scared them in the chamber, but… had it really been that bad?

‘That calling you’re speaking of is certainly a pull. Something is drawing your attention, and I have a vague idea of what actually can tell me something about your call.’

He looked up at the ceiling. He found it odd, how every one of these holes made the skies above visible. Even though he knew that the place was enchanted, it didn’t prevent him from being impressed by it.

‘Have you ever heard any prophecies?’

‘Can’t say I have.’

‘Any nightmares…’

Her voice drifted off into silence as she spoke the last word. Vandheer realized immediately that she had thought of that… thing, which she had done to him while in that hall, which caused his saliva to turn black.

‘Ah! Have you ever had any dreams where you could… decide what to dream?’

Vandheer tried to recall any such dream. In all of his childhood, he never had any dreams worth remembering. All his dreams had been about ripples crawling across a black surface.

‘No, never.’

‘Your normal dreams, then. What are they like?’

‘Although I don’t remember my dreams so often, it’s always the same. White ripples on black water.’

Leila put her right hand over her mouth. Vandheer wondered what it was she was thinking about – there were many things he would probably never learn.

‘You never dream about anything else?’

‘Never. It’s nothing more but a drop falling into black water. I have no idea why the ripples are white, but then again, I can’t make any sense of it.’

‘Why is the water black then?’

‘Beats me. If I had any answers, I wouldn’t have come here.’

Although he had a few ideas, he didn’t believe that he was right. It was well possible that the water was black because of the powers he possessed, but then again, he had many powers. What an Anzareth would have called a variety of powers, was but a minor part of his assets.

They finally arrived at the library’s entrance. Leila picked up the pace, and went straight ahead to a stone door. It was already opened. What came next wasn’t much of a surprise – they had just entered a deeper part of the library. It was more spacious though.

‘Is that you, Leila?’

Vandheer saw the High Priestess standing in front of a table full of books stacked on top of each other. Something shining was on the table, but it was blocked by the stacked books.

‘Yes, High Priestess. We’ve come to find a way to learn more about this pull that Vandheer feels.’

‘Good timing. I want to see what happens when you touch this, Vandheer Nillis.’

She looked up from the table, and displayed a small, glowing, rhombus shaped gem in her palm. If it wasn’t for the dim glow, it would have been transparent. Vandheer stepped closer and held out his hand to it. He felt something pulling at his palm as he held his hand just above the gem.

The gem turned black progressively – it was like pouring black air into a container. It stopped only when it had become completely black, and somehow, the glow remained, but was grey.

‘What happened?’ Vandheer asked. Neither Leila nor the High Priestess looked up from the black gem. They had the exact same stare – shock and awe filled their eyes. But more than anything, he could see fear. Their eyes were shaking. He was perfectly aware of the fact that he had no equals in terms of anything, but this made it seem like an understatement.

All of a sudden he felt a pulse from his hand. His vision became unclear in a ring, as if the gem was sending out a force on its own. It pulled at him. He removed his hand to get a clearer look at it.

The center of it was liquid darkness. The edge had turned blood red. It was only then that Vandheer realized what the pull was –blood had been ripped from him through his skin. Even though it was perfectly intact, his hand was stained red with his own, cursed blood.

*He had just tripped, but he was bleeding nonetheless. And yet, he was scorned for his blood.*

*No one came to him. He had gotten used to it, but it still hurt to see how nobody even cared to give him a pitying look. It hurt more than the wound itself. Even as he looked at it, he saw how quickly it healed. The red liquid trickled down slowly, healing everything it passed. What was once in front of the drop of blood became perfectly healthy skin, once the drop passed. At first, he had considered it a blessing.*

*In time, he realized it wasn’t. His blood was cursed. For some reason, it burned the skin of everyone else. Anyone who had tried to tend to him, anyone who had accidentally come in touch with his blood, had only been sent away with pain, and a wound which never healed completely, no matter the age of the one who had touched his blood. One of the elderly ones had run away from him with his entire hand burning with pain, as if his palm had been skinned. In a sense, that was the case. Seconds later, Vandheer’s hand was completely healed.*

*Some had claimed that Vandheer sapped the life of others. Others said he was cursed.*

‘Demon blood…’

‘What?

Leila had whispered the words so quietly that Vandheer could only just hear them. She looked at him with her eyes wide open.

Without warning, Vandheer felt something hot on his right hand. What met his sight was horrifying – his veins were all black, and completely visible.

‘What are you doing?!’

He could feel how her powers were leaking out of her. He could see how utterly terrified Leila was, and the vibrant, fluid light around her. She was on the floor, backing away from him as if he was death itself. The High Priestess stood in complete silence, but her eyes gave away how shocked she was.

Vandheer had no idea what was going on.

Leila was desperately trying to move away from the ominous shadow that stood where Vandheer had been. It was shapeless, flowing like a plant under water, but it was so utterly dark. Everything around that dark figure was made darker. She could barely see the red eyes in the middle of the black cloud that kept growing as she stared into it, desperately trying to crawl away from it. Dark, liquid vines grew from that shapeless thing, extending around her arms.

It was like staring into the abyss itself. Only when she had fallen on her back as well, did she hear a familiar voice.

‘Leila, restrain yourself!’

Almost instinctively, she obeyed that voice. She took a firm grip on the powers that rested within her. The dark figure faded as she gained control of herself, until it vanished, and Vandheer returned.

She knew what he was, now. She had just realized that what she had been taught about her powers, were far from the whole picture. What she had been taught was insignificant in comparison to that which she could only imagine.

‘High Priestess… is Vandheer truly a human?’

The only reaction Leila could see in the High Priestess was her wide-open eyes. How much had been kept away from Leila? Or more importantly, what more dark secrets were ahead of her? What would the implications be?

She had so many questions to ask, about the Order, Vandheer, the Artiphex, even herself.

‘Whatever it is that just happened, you need treatment.’ Without any notice, several Sisters came and brought Leila up on a litter. She objected to it, but the Sisters firmly put down any resistance she showed.

‘Let us alleviate you from your visions, child.’

Leila felt very uncertain what might happen next.

Saratheia knew very well that it was too late now. Whatever hope she had about controlling Vandheer was gone – with those last words Leila had uttered, she had seen the doubt in both of them.

The worst part was that she understood that doubt. She had never truly believed the existence of demons. Their existence implied inconceivably many things, and made sense of others, but the most perilous threat would be their heirs on the earth. They had always remained a force to be reckoned, and feared. There had been every reason to fear them – as the High Priestess, Saratheia had access to all kinds of secrets and stories kept away from the majority of the Order. Like many others before her, she had decided to keep it that way.

But now, she couldn’t get any of it out of her mind. The implications were too many. History would lacking, with innumerably many newfound chasms yet to be filled, knowledge rendered arrogant ignorance, and the most ominous of all, prophecies could no longer be held in any positive regard – all as one, she would have to consider every prophecy a foretelling of calamities. There was no reason to consider prophecies in any different way in the first place, but now there was every reason to judge them as omens of catastrophes.

And then there was Vandheer, who was seated on a nearby chair. His hand was no longer black, and the gem looked like obsidian, but the dried blood of his remained on the gem’s sharper edges, coloring it dark red at its fringe.

Saratheia felt fear upon witnessing his bearing. She had no clue what he was thinking; she knew nothing about his life. Whatever it was that he had done in the Chamber of the Light, she was certain that the demonic part of him had something to do with it. Vandheer, as she now saw him, was completely different from that menacing act he had put up, but she had no idea what to do with him anymore.

For the first time in many years, she felt helpless.

‘High Priestess… what do you know about me?’

‘Nothing.’ Saratheia was biting her lip.

‘Then what do you know of the Artiphex?’

Some part of her told her that he deserved to know. Another said that he *needed* to know, but most of all, Saratheia felt that she couldn’t keep this a secret anymore. If someone had to know this, no one but Vandheer should. In fact, he had to, for whatever it was that he would one day involve himself in, Saratheia was certain that he had a significant role in it.

‘In the beginning of everything, since time immemorial, there were three races, each residing in its separate plane of existence – the Etherealm, the Netherworld, and the human world. The human world has always functioned like a bridge as well as a middle world, and in time, after some thousand years, the creatures of all three planes met, but were split into two factions. The creatures of the Netherworld opposed those of the Etherealm, and mankind was pulled into the conflict as well, but to both sides. With each side desiring victory, dominance and merging all three realms, a new, third faction emerged, one that sought to separate the three realms, as it was in the beginning, but this third faction was made from members of all three realms. But by the time their purpose was completed, it was already too late. With enough time, magic had been infused into mankind, but something irreversible had happened at the same time. Humans had tapped into, or been given the essences of the other planes, they were changed into something else.’

‘And the Artiphex… who were we touched by, then?’ Saratheia had been waiting for that question.

‘In time, mankind gave names to the two races – seraphs and demons, angels and devils, whatever you prefer. Those touched by seraphs were given ethereal powers, and the most common one is called Light. The ones who had come in contact with the Netherworld, however, possessed all kinds of powers, but the strongest and most terrifying has always been Darkness… only the Artiphex possess such a variety of powers, for only they possess demonic attributes, or display abnormal appearances. When I saw you, I didn’t want to believe it. I had no desire to believe that all the implications were true.’

‘And like me, you now have no choice but to accept it.’

Saratheia listened closely to how he said those words. Something about them made her feel like there was something she should have seen in him.

‘In case you know nothing about me… what can you tell me about this *Wingblade* so many have spoken of?’

‘It was once the sword of a man with no equals.’

Saratheia coiled, thinking about the knowledge she had about that man – and how she had acquired that knowledge.

‘He was the greatest among the living of his time, and at the same time, the most terrifying, fearsome and respectable man in our plane of existence. He could have become the first male leader of the Order, but in his final act of treachery and perseverance, he left the Order to itself, so that he could end a war no one thought would end the way it did, and then he vanished after that. In spite of his loyalty to the order, it was always stronger with his convictions. He did what he deemed necessary… just like me.’

Saratheia quickly covered her mouth. That last part had not been intended in the slightest, but Vandheer hadn’t reacted to it. She turned her eye towards him again.

She couldn’t understand how fearsome he looked there. Back bent, arms crossed and hair covering his face, he looked as if something dormant was only waiting for release – yet, he looked tired. She put her hand on his shoulder, whispering a sentence she remembered, and yet never uttered herself.

‘Do you regret?’

He looked up at her instantly, eyes wide open and focused. Even if she wanted to, her eyes just wouldn’t move away. She could feel the reminiscent feeling of how her eyes were unable to move, locked onto those two rings of blood that were his eyes.

‘When I am united with that which pulls at me, I will answer that question.’

He got up from the chair, moving swiftly towards the library’s exit. Saratheia could only wonder why someone had considered it necessary to give him that outfit – he really looked like he could be the Wingblade’s keeper. She decided to follow him, but he was already gone by the time she had exited the library. She went to the infirmary, only to find that Leila wasn’t there. Saratheia ordered one of the nurses to search for her.

Saratheia had an ominous feeling as she ordered someone to search for the one human rescued by dirges. She decided to head back to the library. Whatever it was that she could remember, there was always more to learn within prophecies. She was certain that Leila had been through many more than anyone else in the Order – she couldn’t afford to remain ignorant of anything.

In spite of how much she disliked that feeling, Saratheia knew that she had doubts about how much she could trust Leila. How much did she know? Although Saratheia was the High Priestess, she was only a bit older than Leila, who had been raised in the Sanctum and studied ever since she first came here. How was Leila’s relationship with the Order?

Saratheia put as many books on the table as she could. She had no idea how much time she would be forced to spend in the library, drifting in the realms of prophecies, turning pages in books that were centuries old. She would also have to notify some daughters, as she would no longer spend as much time in her own chambers. It would be burdensome to bring ancient objects up there. And then there was the matter of where to keep Vandheer. She couldn’t let him out of the Order’s grasp, and if he somehow fled, she needed to have someone stay close to him. She was certain that he could easily overpower most members of the Order. No memory she had could deny that fact.

The first prophecy took her back to a place she well remembered – back in its earliest days, the Order was but a small gathering of prophets, who lived together in a small village. The order itself didn’t truly exist, back then. It was only later, when Light was found in women, that the Order truly began to take shape. When these few women heard of the prophet families, they immediately went to them and settled down there alongside them. Slowly, the prophet bloodlines became a household family within the Order, and a common name to hear of. But as time passed, the number of prophets dwindled, for causes that the Order discovered to be common – the mere impact the prophecies made on those forced to witness them, could not be tolerated by anyone but the strongest among them.

The vision finally took her to something she realized was meaningful. Passing through time as swiftly as the wind travelled across the world, the prophecy had now stopped at the last male prophet. Her memories alone were enough to terrify Saratheia of what this could mean. Morghul Grimeye had been a madman through and through, and his name did everything to describe that. However, it had been undeniable that his madness was the result of his visions. He saw no good things during his entire lifetime. Whenever he sought pleasure, the visions would always come back for him, haunting him, one way or the other, through memories, connections, one wrong word spoken – he was, perhaps, the greatest tragedy ever to have existed within the Sanctum. If he hadn’t been a prophet, he might perhaps have become a great man – he had given many hints to what he might have been if it wasn’t for all his visions, only to discourage that thought in moments of paranoia, madness. Saratheia was the only one in the order who knew what he truly was, though, but she could still not remember everything he had said. And as strange as he already was, he also chose to store his memories in books, in spite of whatever inquires others might have had.

His rough, dark voice spoke in an ominous manner. The shadowing hood, the black robe he wore, his white hands – he held them out, as if offering his life to her, whilst kneeling.

*‘My lady… I have seen the future. I have seen disaster. Everything else in this world, even all-out war from the northern tribesmen to the kings in the south, is but child’s play.’*

She heard a familiar voice answer in turn. *‘Tell me, Morghul Grimeye. What have you seen?’*

*‘I saw the Netherworld, my lady, and I can still see it.’*

He looked up, not directly to where Saratheia’s eyes, but it was impossible to know where he was looking. His eyes reflected his vision.

*‘For how long they will remain dormant, I cannot tell. But they are waiting for a new king, one of dire intents. The memory of the Great Clash is fading among demons. And… my lady, I don’t dare speak lies, yet... I have never seen it, nor have I heard it. Nothing has ever implied it, nor has there been any reason for me to think about this in the first place. It is so absurd you could consider this treason. And most of all, you could consider this madness, as rumors speak about me… but I* know *this.’*

*‘What do you know, Morghul? Speak your thoughts.’*

*‘I cannot, my lady… for we are not the only ones in this room.’*

It was only now that Saratheia understood the most well-known aspect of his madness. He was looking right into her eyes.

*‘There’s a young girl in here… speak up, lass! Why are you here?!’* he shouted.

He had always claimed to see people where no one else could see them, and it was only occasionally. No one had any idea what was going on – was Saratheia truly the first one to discover how different Morghul truly was? She couldn’t remember suspecting him of this strange ability.

‘I seek counsel so that I may guide him… the Wingblade’s heir.’

*‘Ha! Whatever guidance you wish for, do not take me for a fool, heir of my lady.’*

Saratheia was right. Morghul could see those who entered the past through prophecies. And he knew exactly what she was going to say. Or maybe he saw the future as his present.

*‘Morghul, there is no one here.’*

‘Please, I need to know!’

*‘Lass, I’ll tell you this – keep searching while I’m still mad, and not dead.*’

The vision ended. The shock of exiting prophecy was like being plunged into water repeatedly, until she finally returned to the Sanctum’s library with the book in front of her. But that was not the worst part of it. In her hand, she held a note, with a short message written in fine writing she could not believe belonged to Morghul Grimeye, the Mad Prophet.

*I know your ways. Do with your gifts that which I have done with my curse.*

*Morghul*

A voice in her mind whispered to Saratheia in a remorseful tone, while she realized that Morghul’s moments of madness had never been madness. He was perhaps the most powerful prophet the Order had ever been gifted with.

*Don’t let it go to waste.*

The next day, Saratheia had decided to come and wake up Vandheer personally, but during the night. To her surprise, his eyes were wide open, without the slightest hint of sleepiness, while she sat at the side of his bed. It was a rather luxurious guest room, considering the sheer size of the bed.

‘What are you…’

She held the black gem over Vandheer’s head, trying to erase whatever it was that remained within it. The red edge had long since faded to black, but Saratheia could still not banish the image away from her eyes – the sight of blood being ripped through Vandheer’s skin, flowing into the rhombus gem. She soon discovered that her efforts did little to change the color of the rhombus, but some sort of black light emanated from it instead.

‘What do you know about your blood, Vandheer?’

He was already leaning on his arm, their eyes at about the same level. His eye twitched, and his arms were shaking by a tiny amount. Did he have a stable mind? She knew little about him. She needed to know everything.

‘My blood is like fire. Whose blood it is that courses through my veins is something I’ve never learned.’

‘Does it hurt, when you bleed?’

He looked at her with an even gaze. She couldn’t understand how he could be so cold – she was old enough to be his elder sister, but his gaze wasn’t of this world. What childhood could create such people?

‘My blood has a life of its own. It devours flesh, and yet it heals me at a speed faster than any cure. What kind of creature possesses such blood?’

Saratheia could only think of demons. The creatures from the Netherworld had all kinds of abilities – Vandheer’s blood could certainly have been a characteristic from the demon realm. But healing beyond measure? It didn’t fit with any demon traits she could imagine. Even in the books she had read about the Netherworld, which she had only just begun believing in, there was not a single thing about demons that were for defensive use. Even if such healing could be offensively, to remain in battle, Saratheia doubted it.

‘I do not know.’

‘I suppose I might as well tell you this then… the pull is stronger now. It’s no longer a hint – I can feel it all over me. I know where I must go.’

# Bereaved

R

ayne had apparently been waiting for Leila the whole morning. She had forgotten that Leila tended to wake up at noon, since she often stayed awake after midnight, reading until she dozed off.

‘Did you sleep well?’ In spite of Leila’s previous experiences, Rayne was by far one of the most patient women in the Order if she could wait so many hours. Leila didn’t quite understand why she was that way – once, she had been a relatively persuasive woman. The day she returned from a mission, however, Leila rarely saw her ever again. The High Priestess’ words echoed in her mind. What had happened to Rayne?

She nodded instead of answering the question by mouth, holding a cup of water in her hands. They were sitting on the High Priestess’ own garden, light shining upon them from above.

‘You probably wonder why I haven’t met you properly, since I departed on that mission. I think it’s time I told someone about it.’

Leila turned around as Rayne pulled her shoulder. She put her hand in her pocket, and revealed splinters of glass in her palm as she spoke.

‘I don’t know what you’ve been told about me, Leila, but I’ve done everything to hide my glow, ever since I came back. The truth is that my power in Light was ruined since then. Like you, I met something of another world, but not the dirges – I met someone who had returned from the Netherworld.’

Without warning, the glass splinters elevated in the air, eventually hovering around Rayne’s hand as she lifted it, rotating in a circle.

‘Though I was one of the few survivors, none of us were left unscathed. But since I was the one to slay that… *creature*, I was also in danger at that moment. Though it used to be a man, his nails had grown into claws, and he stabbed some of them into my side. Can you guess what happened?’

Leila remained completely silent as she realized what those glass splinters actually were – they were the shattered claws that had wounded her. Rayne rearranged them back into the claws that they used to be. She had never seen or heard of anything of such appearance. She removed her clothes from the side of her body and showed the black scars, and put the claws there as if they were ready to stab her again.

‘In my mind, I imagined that I would be stripped of my title as a Sister of the Order, for I have possessed Darkness ever since that day. The grey aura that I’ve hidden ever since is a testament to that.’

What just happened reminded her slightly of that terrible figure that had faded into Vandheer. Rayne’s glow wasn’t white – it was truly grey, and it wasn’t any bright hue of grey. It was *dark* grey. The claw splinters hovered around her again, until they stopped in midair in various places that Leila couldn’t make any sense of.

‘I have yet to see what I am capable of. I have only gone so far as to use the shadows to defy the laws of our own world. Look at the shadow behind me, Leila.’

Even as her eyes moved, Leila had a vague idea of what her former teacher meant. It was still shocking to see it – the splinters’ shadows hit Rayne’s shadow. That was what kept them in midair.

‘I cannot even begin to imagine what I might do, with this… *power*.’

Her words were trembling, with a tone she couldn’t recognize in that voice. Leila wasn’t hearing Rayne anymore. This wasn’t Rayne.

‘And… that, Leila, is the exact reason for why I cannot afford to use it.’

Her former instructor breathed heavily. Even now, her voice was shaking. Leila had never expected her to end up in such a weakened state.

‘The Darkness is not just a mere power, Leila. Whatever it is that you might read about it, expect the worst of it to be true. The mere possession of it has a price.’

All of a sudden, she began coughing. Even as Rayne covered her mouth, Leila recognized immediately the black air was coming from between her fingers – it looked too much like Vandheer’s blackened saliva, back in the Chamber of Illusions.

Without hesitation, she released her restraints. Whereas some powers were visible to all, Leila’s magic was visible only to her own eyes. The white lines in the air around her went immediately towards Rayne. She tried to do the same thing she had done to Vandheer, but something she failed yet again – the dark air rejected the white straws, forcing them to circle around her.

Leila remembered the rhombus crystal she had been given by the High Priestess. She retrieved it from her pocket, holding it up in the air. The white lines circulating around her and Rayne converged at the rhombus. At the same time, vines of black vapor extended from Rayne, joining the white lines into the rhombus. Leila realized what she had to do now – she pulled out the two substances from the rhombus, binding them to each other, shaping them to her will. The seal settled on Rayne.

Leila was dazzled.

‘So, she gave you a catalyst,’ Rayne whispered. She got up on her feet, walking around the small patch of grass.

‘I don’t know how much strength I have anymore, Leila. My power in Light is but a memory of what it used to be. The Darkness is something I dare not touch, unless I have to, and even then it puts too much of a strain on me. And there is one thing you must know, for it will make your duty all the more difficult.’

Leila turned around to Rayne, who was holding the claw splinters in her hand. She sent them flying around the room, setting them on fire as well, but they didn’t turn into cinders.

‘I can see your gift, now.’

Leila didn’t notice whether her jaw had dropped, but her eyes were wide open.

‘I don’t know how much there is that accompanies Darkness. I can manipulate the elements, just like any other who is born with the more common gifts. It’s almost natural for me, now. But remember this, Leila – I must always keep a watch on the Darkness within me. And unlike me, Vandheer is doing next to nothing to keep himself under control. I don’t know how strong he is, or if he has simply adapted to the Darkness, but you must remain vigilant.’

Rayne looked up towards the source of the light in this room. It wasn’t really something one could see. It was just an ambient source of it, on the ceiling. Something in Rayne’s voice hinted at jealousy and terror at the same time as Leila was about to close the door.

‘I can only imagine how strong he is, with the strength to banish the entire Order’s Light, and yet resist that same Darkness.’

Leila wondered what the Darkness had done to Rayne’s mind.

Vandheer rested on the Order’s outside garden, lying on the grass. The clouds covered the skies like a veil, but it did little to deter him. There was nothing that could be considered calming or reassuring, though. The wind had yet to decide where it would go, as it constantly changed direction. He could even hear horses nickering far off. If anything, he would have expected more of the Order.

His thoughts drifted into nowhere, until he only felt the calling, the pull from the north. The sudden appearance of an upside-down turned face captured his attention.

‘What are you doing here, then?’

Icy blue eyes, blonde hair. From what he could observe, in spite of looking at her upside-down, he could see that she was certainly pretty. Her skin was somewhat pale.

‘Resting. And who are you?’

She didn’t answer the question. Instead, she walked to his front, looking down at him. Vandheer was certain she was inspecting him. He decided to get up, and crossed his legs while he looked up at her.

She was most certainly a pretty woman, as he had assumed. Her blonde hair flowed down her back, and she did everything to impose an air of authority. She was relatively tall for a woman, and her loose clothes fit her arms. She wore an ornate golden bracelet on her left wrist, though Vandheer couldn’t see what it was from this distance. The most noticeable thing was how she practically glowed like fire. He decided to dim it down a bit, but just as he did, the woman’s eyes twitched.

‘You… what did you just do?’

‘If you insist on burning my eyes, I’ll do anything needed to prevent that, Sister…?’

She turned away from him, walking in the direction of the nickering horses. He watched her back as he sat there on the grass, until he decided to lie down again.

He took a deep breath. If anything, Vandheer had never understood people. He figured the Order wasn’t too different – just like back in the village, people feared him. He didn’t understand why they did. He had done nothing to earn it. He sighed, closed his eyes, attempting to drift off into sleep, until the sound of hooves came dangerously close to him. The man who held the horse’s reins signaled for him to get up on it. He got up on his feet, taking a quick look around before he decided to get up on the horse.

Vandheer could see the High Priestess further away, with a couple of other women, including Leila and the woman who had shone like fire. He was tempted to listen to what they were talking about, but decided not to. He wondered if the High Priestess was taking measures to prevent what he had done in the Chamber of Light. It was something he had learned long ago to do, while he was still a little boy. Not that he had used it for anything. He had never heard anything interesting, and if it involved him, it was mostly things he didn’t want to hear. He decided to put that thought away before he reminded himself of the past, and rode towards those who would ride north with him.

The High Priestess confronted him, with three women following behind her, and two men who appeared to be bodyguards standing a bit further away, checking up on horses. Leila and a pair of sisters, apparently. The two men were rugged, but most certainly strong. They did little to hide that fact, and their eyes were stern. He could feel their gaze even from this distance, despite that they looked at him from the corner of their eyes.

‘You will be accompanied until you return from your journey, Vandheer Nillis. Xena and Kryvis Lufar are sisters by blood as you can see, and you already know Leila. The two men over there are their sentinels, Aldruin and Barthas. Leila is still an apprentice, so it’s not time for her to have one of her own yet.’

‘Why is it that one must become a Sister, in order to gain a “sentinel”, which you speak of?’

‘There is no need for one until that happens. The Sanctum is the safest place on the face of the earth.’

Some part of Vandheer felt like objecting to that statement, but he let it go. He looked past the High Priestess, at Leila. Her flaxen hair was unavoidable to his eyes, but what kept locking his stare were her sky blue eyes. They reminded him of too much. Hesitantly, he looked away, towards the sisters instead. That fact was very visible. He had noticed though, that bright hair was very common among the Order’s members. He figured that it was due to their powers. Both of them wore white cloaks. Some part of him knew that their purity and fabric would remain in spite of any weather, or any amount of travelling. Vandheer wasn’t too sure about his black cloak, but that was the least of his worries.

‘Since you are leaving the Sanctum, however, I cannot allow you to remain alone. And just to make sure you don’t do anything dangerous, Xena and Kryvis will advise you on your way.’

‘Why is Leila here, then?’

‘You don’t need to know that. As you had anticipated, there are some arrangements in our agreement. In time, you will have to deal with them.’

‘In time?’

The High Priestess turned around, leaving Vandheer and his troupe.

‘Farewell, Vandheer Nillis.’

As they rode the North Road in the city of Sylus, Vandheer couldn’t help his inability to ignore all the stares from the crowd. And, not surprising, he was the one who they paid the most attention to. Sisters of the Order were a common sight even outside the Sanctum, as he observed, but the number of children who stopped what they did, only to stare wide-eyed at the man with the black hair, occasional red strands, and red eyes, were beyond counting, and while men scowled at his foreign looks, women and huddled together.

He looked over his shoulder, at the Lufar sisters, Leila, and the two sentinels. The sisters ignored the crowd completely, and the sentinels seemed to be glance over everything they saw, searching for anything that might threaten them. They even looked back at Vandheer, as if to make sure he didn’t make any rash move.

‘Where do you come from, boy?’ one of the sisters asked. It was the blue-eyed one who was asking him. She had a rather stern look on her face.

‘I was raised on the Black Mountains.’

‘How is it then, to descend from such heights?’

Vandheer sensed some ill intent in the way she formulated the question. He noticed how the other sister looked at her.

‘I’m already used to the air here. I’ve never had difficulties with thin air either.’

Truth be told, the air on the lower lands was outright reinforcing, to Vandheer. Back in the village, he could easily have beaten anyone of his age in any sport. Here, he could beat anyone who’d used his body for a major part of his life.

‘Tell me again, why is it that we’re going north, sister?’

‘The High Priestess said it quite clearly, Kryvis.’

Vandheer looked at the elder sister he assumed to be Xena. Her eyes were green instead, and she was pretty, though perhaps in a different way than her sister. Her expression was earnest, and rather focused. She had a completely different air around her. She sighed as Kryvis looked away in aversion. He wondered what kind of relationship they had.

‘Do you truly feel it physically, Vandheer Nillis? Is it tugging at you?’

‘It’s like having someone pull at my skin,’ Vandheer replied. A little child was about to go in front of his horse until her mother pulled her back into the crowd, on the side of the road. He had rarely seen such innocent looks. Some were in awe, others in fear. The most common expression in the large crowd was wonder.

‘Do people usually give you those kinds of looks?’

Vandheer was surprised to hear that question from Kryvis.

‘I’m used to resentment, actually.’

They rode on in complete silence after his reply, until they reached the edges of the city, approaching the city walls. What met his sight was still recent to his eye and mind, but a bit of a shock, nonetheless. Beggars, homeless people – even children – incomplete excuses of houses and the most surprising thing of all, people who actually helped those the unfortunate.

‘Is this the work of the Order?’

‘Indeed it is,’ Xena answered. A slight smile sneaked onto her lips.

‘It’s more or less a custom in the Order, to help the poor.’ Kryvis made little effort to hide how she wouldn’t promote it.

‘Although, there are some good people among them who end up in the Order’s service. Many homeless children are housed at the orphanages run by the Order’s funding.’

Vandheer only just noticed the sound of clinking armor behind him. It surprised him a bit how one of the sentinels probably used to live here in the slums.

‘And on the other hand, there are those who resort to thievery, murder, and whatnot. There is a reason this place exists.’

Somewhere in Vandheer’s mind, he felt agreement. Though he was still new to the world outside the village, he had learned many things, about both the place he was born, and the rest of the world, where no great gifts were to be seen on a daily basis.

‘And as such, it is fortunate that the city walls are close by, so that nothing bad happens. At least not too many things happen.’

The fortifications were indeed impressive. Vandheer didn’t even need to touch to know how the solid, continuous surface had been made through other means than human hands, although he could feel how it wasn’t natural. The very air around the place reminded him of a battlefield.

The soldiers standing at the gate were covered from top to bottom, either with tough leather or armor, some wearing chainmail as well. The gate itself was simply put a giant double door made of stone, reinforced with metal and whatever the Order had done with it. He had noticed how every city’s fortifications were well guarded, but to this grade was not something he would have expected. All the guards had stern looks on their faces. Their expressions didn’t change when the two sisters descended from their horses and were granted permission to pass through the northern gate. Vandheer could already see from here that the bridge to the mainland was rather long.

‘You!’

One of the soldiers responded to Kryvis’ shout.

‘What were you just talking about?’

‘My lady, I was saying that rumors say that the High Rule is no more. Refugees from the Wingblade’s Fortress have come and claimed that the fortress itself was raided.’

‘Nonsense. Until the Order receives word from the Fortress, I don’t want any discussion about this.’

‘Yes, my lady.’

As soon as the giant stone doors closed behind them, Vandheer turned around to the sisters.

‘Where is Wingblade’s Fortress?’

‘Once we get to the middle of the bridge, you’ll see it.’

The bridge was arched, and fulfilled that single arch all the way until they reached the mainland. At the middle, its highest point, Vandheer could see a fortress of vast dimensions to the northeast, sticking out of a cluster of mountains. There were several towers that reached far up in the air even above the smaller part of the mountain range, and even from this distance, Vandheer could see why it was called a fortress.

‘Within its walls is a city even larger than Sylus, but the purpose of Wingblade’s Fortress is to hold off sieges. No army has ever penetrated deep beyond the walls, and those who managed to get past the walls are few in number, and were led by ingenious generals in times where the Fortress was in deep crisis. No scholar has claimed those armies to be without luck either. Simply put, it’s a fortress of immeasurable defensive capability, and the glacier on the mountain range further off keeps it well supplied with water. The longest siege of the Fortress lasted no more than two months, until the invaders were obliterated.’

Vandheer kept his eyes on the Fortress until they came to the bridge’s end. The height of the towers was incomprehensible to him. He didn’t understand how they could have been built, or why anyone would want such tall towers.

‘Most people are amazed the first time they see it.’

Vandheer didn’t reply. Even as they ventured north at a trot, he still gave the mountains hiding the Fortress an occasional look. The towers kept sticking out. Nothing about them felt right.

As the sun descended down the horizon, they just reached a small town with a river coming from the north. It didn’t look too different from Sylus – it was mostly that Sylus had more of everything, and in larger dimensions. The ones who greeted them were just lookouts armed with knives. For the inspection though, a rugged, old soldier came to them with a smile on his face, inviting them closer. Xena signaled for Vandheer, Leila and the sentinels to stay where they were. Vandheer could only barely hear them. The man had a little brown hair, which was fading grey at his temples.

‘Ah, Sisters of the Order. I’m sorry that you have to go through this, but this is the theocracy’s border after all. You know the rules, I assume?’

‘Most certainly, inspector.’ Vandheer figured that Xena commanded over her sister, as she took the word.

‘We are just passing through this country, as we have matters to deal with. We’re looking for a place to rest overnight, and continue further north.’

‘To the empire? Well, excuse my intrusion, Sister, it is only out of curiosity that this old soldier asks, but… where is that man from? It has been long since anyone with black hair appeared on this side of the Fortress.’

‘He is an important asset to the Order. Don’t worry about him.’

‘Most certainly, Sisters. I pray the Benevolent One smiles upon you.’

Whoever it is that the man talked about, Vandheer had no idea what he meant. He wasn’t sure if it was a common thing to say, although he had heard similar things in Sylus.

Just as Vandheer was about to pass the rugged soldier, he felt something eerie about the man. He could feel the tense air around him, fading only when they had passed a couple of buildings and eventually found an inn. Without giving it another thought, Vandheer went up along the stairs with the two sentinels, and to his surprise, he’d share the same room as Leila. There were two beds in the room, fortunately, and a window. The light of the full moon lightened up the room.

Vandheer picked up a chair and put it in front of the window, gazing at the night sky. He turned around to the door as he heard the sound of footsteps, and to his surprise, Leila had come with some stew. She handed it to him silently, sitting on her bed as he ate it, looking at the moon.

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘I won’t promise you any answer.’

She hesitated, but eventually began asking him about many things.

‘How was it, growing up at the Black Mountains?’

‘Lonely. Only a handful of people accepted me for who I was, and even that happened when nothing really mattered to me anymore.’

‘And… do you know why you were treated that way?’

‘I know that perfectly well,’ Vandheer growled, gritting his teeth. He clenched his fists unintentionally.

‘I was nothing like them. I was in no way comparable or similar to anyone. Whatever I had, I was hated for it. Whatever I was capable of, I was feared for.’

‘So why do you seek to go north then?’

‘Because it is the only hope I have left. Like you, I have questions, but it is only now that I am being given answers.’

‘What will you do then, once we find that which you seek?’

‘That, I cannot answer.’

Leila picked up the plate once he was finished eating, and returned soon afterwards. He figured she’d want to sleep, so he had already gotten onto the bed, turned away from her. She was quite careful to make as little sound as possible as she went into her own bed.

‘Good night, Vandheer.’

He didn’t reply. He soon came to regret it after he heard her silent breathing. Vandheer realized he was unable to sleep at all, listening to Leila’s breath, just like the time when his life had taken a turn for the better, for once.

The bitterness of his losses returned. He grinded his teeth unwillingly, fists clenched. He decided to go outside. Contrary to his expectations, the border town wasn’t completely deserted at night. He saw a few children playing around, although watched by their parents. Some civilians were carrying around lanterns, for whatever reasons they weren’t sleeping at night.

He decided to hop onto the roof of the relatively tall inn, and lie down on its tiles. The memories came relentlessly at him.

*Once again, he had missed out on everything. Whatever celebration there might be going on, Vandheer was never invited, nor spoken to during the festivities. He felt he should have been used to it. It never came, that indifference. He always envied them, everyone who wasn’t like him, everyone who got to participate. Even though he could see the fireworks like everyone else, he was always alone about it.*

*Despite that spring wasn’t far away, it was still cold. The mountains were never particularly warm except for the peak of summer. Vandheer didn’t notice the cold as much as he’d expect though. He had given less thought to cold as time passed by. At some point, he just didn’t feel the cold winter snow anymore. The northern winds meant nothing to him.*

*Vandheer turned his back to the fireworks and walked eastwards, until he could no longer hear the fireworks. He felt no hesitation about leaving the village. There was nothing for him here. Even as he felt the stream of tears freeze on his pale skin, even as his heart ached, he knew that fate wanted nothing to do with him.*

*He sat in the middle of a field of snow. He eventually decided to lie down, and sleep until life faded from his cold body.*

*Unexpectedly, he woke up. The bright light that surrounded him wasn’t from the sun. As his eyes adapted to it, Vandheer realized he was in a tent, with a small fire in it. A heavy fur blanket lied on top of him, and something wet was on his head. It was a small towel.*

*He got up in a sitting position, looking for whomever it was who had just denied him eternal rest.*

*‘Oh, you’re up?’*

*The woman turned around as he heard him remove the blanket. She had dark blue hair as well as eyes. Whatever beauty she possessed, it only hurt him to see it. And to top it all off, she looked at him as if he was an innocent child. She grabbed the wet towel he had put to his side, wringing out the cold water in it. She was dressed in a thick coat, also made from fur.*

*‘Thank goodness you’re awake. I wasn’t sure you would wake up, having been in the snow for two days. What were you thinking, going out on your own?’*

*He grabbed the edge of the fur so hard the skin on his knuckles turned white. Her innocent tone enraged him to no end.*

*‘WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO ME?’*

*At first shocked by his scream, she turned around, and then her expression changed completely when she saw him.*

Vandheer barely noticed the pebbles that were tossed up at the inn’s roof. Then he heard a voice he recognized as one of the sentinels’.

‘Lad, get down here.’

Instead of jumping down completely, Vandheer hopped down onto the horse stall.

‘Which one’s sentinel are you?’ Vandheer asked. The man had actually bothered with that leather armor here, in the middle of the night.

‘My mistress is the younger one. Why aren’t you in bed?’ To his surprise, the man’s voice sounded calm.

‘I could ask the same of you.’

‘Well then, I’ll give you my answer. My mistress wants to know you in and out, lad. For what purposes, your answers are just as good as mine.’

Vandheer waited. The man had patience. He hopped down from the roof, landing softly on the ground.

‘I couldn’t sleep.’

‘Lad, I know you don’t trust me or any of us.’

‘And your point is?’

‘Do you think anyone will trust you, if you don’t trust anyone?’

‘Your idea goes both ways.’

‘Trust starts with one person inviting another into a relation of honesty. When will you do that, lad?’

Vandheer made no attempt at hiding his bitterness.

‘When someone invites me, for once.’

Leila was surprised to find that Vandheer had already gotten up ahead of her, by the time Xena woke her up. Kryvis had already gone ahead, and so Leila ended up eating in front of Xena. The Sister occasionally looked towards the entrance of the inn.

‘Where is he?’

‘Somewhere outside… he was apparently lying on the roof for some time during the night.’

Leila looked down on her food. Even though she kept reminding herself of it, Vandheer was unpredictable. She knew so little about him.

‘My apologies, I didn’t expect him to act like that, I…’

‘You are still an apprentice, Leila. Don’t get too upset. I’m fairly sure he didn’t intend to go on alone. A lone foreigner is often the victim of suspicion, even young men like him.’

‘I’m sorry for questioning you, but… how can you be so certain?’

‘Barthas had a word with him while we were asleep. Stubborn like any other man, but he is far from foolish.’

‘I must apologize again, but… I don’t think it is stubbornness. When I delved into his past, I didn’t expect him to react the way he did. He sounded like he was in pain.’

‘I’ll deal with it later. It is not of importance at this time, as that pull of his is more significant.’

Leila finished her meal, and followed Xena outside. Vandheer was nowhere to be seen, nor were any of the sentinels. Kryvis was waving towards them from a distance down the road northwards, already on her horse. They got up on their own horses and met up. The civilians that were bustling about made way swiftly, as they all recognized the Sisters’ clothes.

‘Where is he then?’ Leila asked. Kryvis pointed further ahead northwards.

‘He went that way, but I have no idea what he is doing.’

As they waited, Vandheer soon appeared from a narrow alleyway. He had covered himself completely in that black cloak, but some red strands of his hair were visible.

‘What were you doing?’ Kryvis asked. Leila could hear a slight amount of suspicion in her tone.

‘I found a lost child, whom I decided to help.’

Both of the sisters were taken aback by Vandheer’s statement. Their eyes opened wide for a second before they brushed the subject aside, telling him to get on his horse. They rode northwards immediately, through the gates without any inspection whatsoever. The lightly armored guards had taken a thorough look at Vandheer, however.

‘Why did you help that child?’ Xena asked all of a sudden. They were in the middle of a long road, with a village not too far away. Leila could see what she assumed to be a farm.

‘She was crying, asking where her mother was.’

‘And you answered her call.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, that is just what happened. What made you help her?’

Vandheer gave Xena a sharp look before looking at the road again.

‘… I know what else might have happened.’

Kryvis looked at him until he noticed her. She turned her gaze back towards the road.

Leila knew that she knew little about Vandheer, but she still didn’t expect him to bring such a heavy atmosphere even outside the Sanctum. Was he like that most of the time? She had yet to experience any light air around him. She could have understood any feelings of discomfort in a place filled with wielders of Light whereas he possessed Darkness, but now she wondered if that even scared him in the slightest.

As time passed and they came ever closer to the source of the pull, Leila couldn’t help wondering about Vandheer. He was as enigmatic as prophecy, impossible to read without questioning every possible interpretation and even underlying meanings hidden through secrets upon secrets. The few things she knew for sure about him were mostly his own explanation from that time she had lost control of the vision. Instead of getting a glimpse into his memories, they had materialized in the form of an illusion around them, and all she had learned was that he had survived a horrible event.

She wondered what powers he possessed, other than Darkness. Leila rode a bit closer to Vandheer, until they were next to each other. She spoke quietly, but remained audible for at least one of the sisters to hear her.

‘What powers do you have other than Darkness?’

‘I have a variety. I can control most things at my disposal, be it fire, stone, ice, even air itself. Some abilities I possess are unique though…’

Leila was about to ask him another question until she noticed that he was focused on something ahead of them. When she realized what he was actually looking at the sky, she calmed down a little – until she decided to take a look herself. The sky would normally have been a clear blue, but she could see grey hues scattered north of them. They weren’t even clouds; the sky was actually closer to grey in some areas. She could swear that clouds didn’t blend in like that.

‘Are you sensitive to… disturbances?’ Leila asked.

He didn’t answer. His eyes were locked forward up at the grey sky further ahead. Both of the sisters turned to him as he didn’t respond, but suddenly one of them signaled for Leila to ride a bit ahead of Vandheer. She came a bit closer to him, just an arm’s distance in front of him. His attention was entirely focused on the grey skies, but Leila had never expected what she was seeing right now.

Vandheer’s eyes had turned blood red, and blood was gathering at his eyes. A drop began its journey down his cheek. He lifted his left arm. He was reaching out towards the grey skies ahead, and his eyes were trembling. Then Leila realized that it wasn’t only his eyes; it was the ground beneath them that was shaking. The horses panicked, and the sentinels had already hopped off onto the ground, reining in the horses. She saw bits of the earth hover in the air; a breeze came by, but it grew into a heavy current in no time. Before she realized it, nobody was on their horses anymore. Vandheer had simply slumped down on the ground, but he was crawling, still trying to reach out northwards.

What happened next was beyond Leila’s comprehension. Vandheer’s shadow stretched out behind him like a flooding river, and the ground kept shaking even more violently. She could have sworn that it was cracking some places, but the sheer darkness of Vandheer’s shadow made it impossible to see clearly.

Suddenly, the chaos disappeared just as abruptly as it had begun, the moment Vandheer’s arm dropped to the ground. Xena was on her knees next to Vandheer, hands on her thighs, breathing heavily. Leila waited a bit before she got back up on her feet.

‘What in the name of all that is good…’

Aldruin helped Xena up on her legs as he remarked upon the sudden event.

‘Leila, is there anything you know that might relate to this?’ Kryvis asked. Leila was fairly sure she was asking instead of her sister due to that Xena was apparently exhausted. She shook her head, to Kryvis’ disappointment. Leila went over to Vandheer who was lying on the ground, eyes closed, blood wiped off from his cheeks. She still found it hard to believe that he had shed tears of blood. Or maybe it had nothing to do with tears in the first place. The droplets on the ground stained the earth completely black. Whatever might have been growing there was surely dead as well.

She was suddenly reminded of that ominous black shadow which had covered Vandheer, when she had lost control of her own power. Would she have seen that again just now, if she had lost control of herself in the chaos?

Leila was still unsure about how much the two sisters knew – and how much the High Priestess wanted anyone to know. Even though she was under orders, she was certain that it was necessary to reveal in what ways Vandheer was completely different. The only problem left was exactly what she was going to reveal about him.

‘I can explain while we ride,’ she answered, hopping up on her horse with a bit of help from Barthas. The horses were still a bit afraid, until the sentinels tied Vandheer back onto his horse and they were on their way.

Leila wondered where to start.

‘Vandheer is everything but normal. Even for a man in possession of Darkness, he is completely different from the accounts I’ve read. Most wielders of Darkness possess only that, along with the more common gifts such as fire. But he is… not on the same level, but on another side of power. He doesn’t possess anything simple. He can’t.’

She showed them the gem which had contained Vandheer’s blood in it. The core of it was still the same liquid shadow, but the rim was still as red as fresh blood.

‘Not even containers such as this one can remain unaffected. They do not interact in any known way. Blood was literally ripped through his skin and into it. I cannot explain this black core with any assurance. Nothing has revealed to me how he dimmed the Chamber of Light. Everything I’ve read is wrong one way or another. All I have is what I’ve experienced around him.’

The two sisters were only slightly worried, and probably because Leila didn’t know much about Vandheer. Xena looked up upon the sky to the north. Leila felt a cold raindrop land on her head. Heavy clouds waited above. Even though it wouldn’t be an issue, she still felt unwell about it. Loose bits of the ground had come off everywhere around them. She was certain that whoever traversed their path, would notice the earth’s unusual state.

‘Whatever happens, we must press on.’

As they continued on the road northwards, they still found scattered bits of dirt that had come loose, miles away from where Vandheer had collapsed.

# Prayer

C

ontrary to Vandheer’s expectations, the theocracy wasn’t such a large country. Whitefield’s capital didn’t look like it was any special, even after the three towns they had rested at, until he saw Amon’s Shrine. At first, he thought the sisters meant that it was just a part of the capital, but it was far more than that. It was a large complex consisting of multiple, towering buildings connected to each other through bridges and hallways suspended in the air between them, and to top it all off, it was underneath a hollow mountain. The structures looked as if they had been carved out from enormous pillars of rock that supported the mountain’s surface, and went further down. Torches lit the underground city everywhere, and great bonfires dotted the cavern.

Vandheer still had difficulties understanding why they had brought him here however – Kryvis had mentioned upon the entry bridge that they were going to meet a “priest” at first. They had been greeted by monks instead of soldiers, but he had noticed soldiers dotting the arching platforms that were scattered across the cavern city. The platforms, hanging from or standing on top of the same kind of pillars that supported the mountain’s surface, connected the underground city’s various buildings. It looked like carefully grown vine, from a distance. Amon’s Tomb was further back, and he figured it was the ruler’s residence as well. It didn’t share the same color as the rest of the carved city, but it reflected various colors from each structure. For whatever reason they were going there however, Vandheer had his doubts about what a priest could do.

As they walked from one platform to another, Vandheer was impressed at how well most citizens fared. He had yet to see someone who even hinted at being homeless. Hardly anyone looked like they had difficulties – if anyone wore something dirty it was usually just a cloak, and even then he still hadn’t found anyone who wore jagged clothes. At worst, people wore sandals, even though it was the middle of autumn. He couldn’t help noticing however, that few people wore fine clothes that he had seen at Sylus. He had yet to see anyone who even looked remotely like a noble. They did come across monks dressed in a similar fashion as those from the entrance. Their simple, dark robes made them otherwise completely unremarkable, if it wasn’t for the fact that they all hid their faces beneath a dark hood.

‘Anything wrong?’ Kryvis asked him.

‘This place is devoid of beggars. What kind of place is a theocracy?’

‘You don’t know about anything outside of where you grew up, do you?’

Vandheer remained silent.

‘Well, I don’t know if most people here believe in it, but the rulers believe in an absolute being we like to call the Creator. Whatever it is that people accredit to him, it’s mostly good things, most commonly a being of justice, and the creator of the world as we know it. Some believe the Creator is almighty, others think he is kind. Nobody can claim to have seen him, so therefore it is also believed that he is merely a spectator to what he started, or that it’s all part of a greater plan.’

‘And that’s supposed to make sense?’

‘Some claim he is beyond logic.’

Vandheer looked towards the ceiling of the cavern. There were some considerably larger platforms up there, and he could swear there were vines growing on what seemed to be wood. He sighed as he concluded that the place allowed plants to grow even without true sunlight.

‘The perfect answer to every problem.’

The women all looked at him, apparently surprised by his statement.

‘You wouldn’t believe it?’ Xena asked, eyes slightly more open.

‘There is every reason not to.’

Vandheer sighed again as he looked over the fence, further down the cave. Where buildings and platforms did not occupy his sight, he saw unrelenting darkness. He wondered just how far down the chasm reached. What purpose was there even, to have it that deep?

They continued on in silence as they came ever closer to Amon’s Tomb. He could only stare. If anything, it was more or less a palace. The towers that surrounded it were colored dark red, brown, black and white. In between there were bridges connecting them to each other, and they formed defense positions by being above each other. As soon as they passed the walls – after a thorough inspection and a short interrogation by a couple of grizzled guards, all of whom carried hard stares and a handful of weapons – he could properly see all the mansions that resided within, and the grand tomb that lied further back, unhindered and left at the end of an empty road. All the mansions were obviously designed with grandeur in mind, but the tomb further ahead was on an entirely different level. Even though it didn’t even have five floors, it was still a marvel to behold.

The great temple was constructed entirely in white marble, on the outside. The pillars supported the ceiling which was high enough above them to give room to two additional floors, and the walls behind the pillars had inscriptions in a language Vandheer had never seen before. The doors that sealed the entrance were almost invisible, if it wasn’t for the fact that they were decorated with a single symbol he felt like he should remember. A single, large sword, coupled with wings instead of crossguards.

‘What does that symbol mean?’ he asked.

‘You should recognize it by now. It’s the Wingblade,’ Xena answered. The doors opened slowly, sliding across the floor. Within Amon’s Tomb there was only darkness to greet them, until torches lit up without warning. The entrance hall was not remarkable – there were two rows of tall pillars, and everything was still made of marble. Further ahead he saw the shadowy silhouette of an entry to somewhere else. But what caught his eye, was a shadow which seemed out of place, behind a pillar.

‘And so the Wingblade requested the building of the tomb of Amon, the temple some have come to know as a crypt of secrets, others a cursed tomb, a few a holy place, but to people like us, a meeting place, and full of curiosities.’

The priest came forth, and was dressed in a white robe instead. A black scarf covered his neck, and his grey hair reached his chest along with his beard. The man’s figure was completely unremarkable, although he had a mark on his right cheek – it reminded Vandheer of a staff, which the priest also brought out of the shadows. It emitted completely white light at the top of it, from a crystalline object.

‘And for today, with even more curiosities,’ he said, smiling. The priest was aging, and he had made no attempts hiding it, obviously leaning somewhat on his staff. Creases had appeared and he didn’t seem to be bothered by anything, keeping his back completely straight. His voice was aging as well, and but was probably used to talk in front of audiences even at his age, as he spoke loud and clear.

‘Cut to the chase, priest.’ Barthas stepped forward, giving the priest a grim look, whose smile faded into an open expression instead.

‘I see we do not have luxuries. Well then, please follow me deeper into the tomb.’

The two sentinels lit up some torches they found lying on the floor, handed them over, and then they entered the staircase which was just behind the dark silhouette of an entry. It was circular and made with stone, and as they descended, Vandheer couldn’t help but think that something was off. He could swear the wall had a pattern, but there was no repetition of anything. He saw only lines formed by the cement between the stones, with no similarity yet no significant change in the way they were made. It was all progressive.

‘Even though this temple was publicly known to be the resting place of Amon of Moria, the second prophet of men, it was secretly the hiding place of spoils from the War of Culmination.’

‘What war?’ Vandheer asked. The priest stopped in his tracks, surprised at first, but smiled once again at Vandheer as he continued.

‘At first I thought I was only rambling uselessly, but it seems we have an uneducated one,’ the priest stated. He rearranged his scarf, and cleared his throat. As he explained, he kept hitting the wall gently with his staff rhythmically, as if to measure how many times he would have to hit it before they eventually came to the bottom.

‘The War of Culmination was by far and wide the worst thing that ever happened to this world, although it took place on the empire of Moria which used to be far and wide. Oh, and my name is Adarin. Anyway, ages ago, when the Wingblade himself walked the lands and it was a time of peace, magic was far from extraordinary, but there were extraordinary people among those who possessed magic in the first place. Fireworks were a common thing to have on parties, if one could afford it, for extraordinary individuals were to be found everywhere, and their services varied but had the common trait of being amazing as well. It was a time one would have guessed went by peacefully, until disputes rose. Some say it started with thievery, others a bad negotiation, or an accident. Nevertheless, these extraordinary individuals would put up with their troubles no more, for they were not well rewarded for their services. Carrying cargo by air, redirecting the flow of water, extracting scents from liquids, lighting fires for those who lacked the means, building singlehandedly what others could not – whatever favor or job they were asked to do, they did not fare any better than most people, and the inevitable eventually happened, and let us see if we can get this door opened swiftly.’

The priest tapped at a yellow stone door in front of them three times, although the brightness of the color had faded somewhat. Then he outright stabbed the door in a place which seemed to fit the end of it, although with a grunt. The door split open, revealing a hall similar to the entrance, with another dark silhouette at the other end. Vandheer guessed it would go on like this for a while. The priest Adarin led the way to the center, where he turned around left. There were only four pillars in this slightly smaller hall, and one open door at each side. Vandheer noticed the hall was actually squared.

‘I believe it is this direction, if my memory serves well. Now, the inevitable was racket from these extraordinary individuals. Over time, they had huddled together and were a group to be recognized. Many had seen their common powers of manipulating the world – be it setting wood on fire, send cargo flying, shape the earth as needed, anything. However, no one had ever seen the destructive use of their powers, not even those in possession of such power. But so came the day when the leaders among them made requests. They were heard, mind you, but not once met, and always replied to with a demand from the ones without any… power.’

The priest tapped at another door after studying it for a short moment, this time slightly green. He repeated the process, and concluded they would go to the right this time. This time, the stairs went upwards.

‘Of course, I cannot say the sources are correct, but none of them are wrong! As the racket quieted down, some individuals settled with their lives as they were before. However… ugh, these stairs are not good for old bones. Nonetheless, the groups among them were like dried patches of grass within a lush forest called mankind, waiting for someone with the will… someone with…’

The priest stopped, turned slowly around to Vandheer with a stare he did not find comfortable.

‘A soul of fire.’ The priest turned his head suddenly back to the stairs, tapping the wall again with his shining staff.

‘And many of the groups were visited by one or two who were indeed upset about their kind’s situation, but what separated these from everyone else, was their readiness to fight for their cause, or rather, kill to have things go their way.’

Adarin stabbed a barely blue door. The next hall had no torches whatsoever, and the entry lead to a straight passage. The stones were blue, but faded into purple.

‘And as a result, once the less violent ones realized what they could truly do, how easily the powerless fell and begged for their lives, the hesitation was gone. It all escalated until these individuals had formed their own alliance, and as uprisings go, the most power-hungry men and women were at the top. It didn’t take long for any region of Moria to fall. Whatever resistance they met, these individuals obliterated every obstacle in their path. Even those with not-so-remarkable powers joined hands with the empire in order to put an end to the war. At least, attempt to end it in their favor.’

‘How were they stopped?’ Vandheer asked.

‘Oh! You are one of few who presume that they *were* indeed stopped young man, but fortunately they were! However, while some would say it was too late, most of us believe that later is better than never, with the exception of procrastination. And it was at this time that the Wingblade himself appeared from the religious heart of Moria, the Sanctum of Light. But… he was no savior. He was a notorious man, to say the least. As if from a story, he emerged from the light to rescue us from our coming defeat, but he fell like a nightmare upon the extraordinary individuals. Butchered them all like it was children’s play, without a whiff of mercy – cold, precise and decisive in his swift massacre, and there is no other way to describe it. At best, I have heard a man call it an execution. Whatever the Wingblade’s victims did, their magic was useless. Eventually, the war was over through his efforts alone, but the man vanished without a trace shortly after he demanded the construction of the tomb of Amon. He did leave behind messages however… which most would listen to as it is very sensible, but as for the one concerning Amon’s Tomb…’

They were reaching the end of the passage, and the passage here was red, but a specific hue Vandheer recognized very well after having seen it repeatedly in substantial amounts – blood red. Adarin turned around when he came to it, with a frightening expression, and stared again at Vandheer as they came closer to the door.

‘I did not.’

All the torches dimmed immediately, as well as Adarin’s white light. Vandheer heard Aldruin and Barthas unsheathe blades, as well as the women’s breathing hasten. Vandheer felt someone hold on to his arm. The sounds of steel stopped when Vandheer made a ring of bright fire appear above them. Adarin was poking the door at the end of the passage, apparently having difficulties finding the right place. Leila was holding Vandheer’s arm, and let go once she opened her eyes.

‘After all, I never expected I’d have the opportunity to come all the way here without losing any light. Lad, you are the one, aren’t you?’

Vandheer only stared at the old priest’s back as flames danced above them. Adarin still had difficulties finding the right spot.

‘The Wingblade warned that everyone but the extraordinary individuals, commonly known as the Artiphex, would be in danger here, but even then they would not be able to feel completely safe, namely for this reason – whosoever stands in front of the bloody walls will not live to see his own light again… until he exits the tomb completely, which is by all means a challenging task when in the dark,’ he casually stated, finally finding the right spot to stab his staff into again. The bloody doors rumbled as they split. They closed immediately once everyone had entered.

The hall they entered was completely different from every other one. There were no pillars here, but it was more like a cavern. The walls arched towards the ceiling, where stalactites hung. The floor wasn’t completely even, but in the middle of the cave there was a single pedestal. As Adarin lead the way towards it, the pedestal turned out to have a basin on the top of it. Adarin raised his hand after putting his hand in it.

‘Hm. Completely dried out.’ He turned around towards them, looking into their eyes.

‘Well, seeing as I am but a priest, I hope someone among you may contribute to filling this bowl with… a liquid, hopefully.’

‘That is outside of our abilities,’ Kryvis replied. The sentinels looked around as if they could hear worms digging behind the walls. Xena sighed, apparently losing hope.

Vandheer stretched his arms and opened his hands. He closed his eyes… and felt the air.

At first, it seemed like everything was slightly brighter, until mist was formed. It didn’t occupy the room completely at first, but once it did, there was plenty of it. He was completely oblivious of anyone reaction. It grew thicker, until none of them could see the end of the room, and the ring of fire above them did little to help with visibility.

He raised his hand and opened his palm, and watched as the mist condensed into a growing sphere of water. When it was complete, it slowly slipped through the air and filled the basin completely.

Vandheer continued breathing again, facing a surprised expression on everyone’s faces. The women were all shocked, the sentinels wary, but the priest was outright amazed.

‘Incredible. Absolutely incredible.’

As he slowly grasped what had just happened, he turned around to face the filled water basin. The bottom of it looked like ordinary stone – it was grey, and the surface was smooth. He raised his staff and removed the object on the top of it, putting it into the puddle of water. It dissolved swiftly, and the water started to shine with the same white light. Vandheer let the ring of fire fade away. The priest moved his hands within the water, completely immersed in moving his hand in ways Vandheer could only make guesses about. The light didn’t change for a while until he began to whisper incantations. They were short words, no sentences at all.

‘Now, we are finally ready. Let us see what this light can show us,’ Adarin said, raising his hands from the water. He proceeded to look at Vandheer again.

‘Is there something I’m supposed to do?’

‘Well, this is no ordinary bowl, nor was this any ordinary staff as I’m sure you understand. These were artifacts from the War of Culmination, made by the Artiphex ages ago.’ Adarin walked to the other side of the basin and put his forearms on the edge of the basin.

Vandheer’s eyes opened up wide.

*This is it.*

‘It poses no threat, at least not directly, but I had difficulty finding records of these. The matter at hand, young man, is that this basin will reveal something that is connected to you, no matter what it is, where it is… or when this “something” will be relevant for you. Seeing as these sisters needed some help, this is the best I can offer you, although I did have to be quiet about this. Now, before we begin, I will request my part of the contract, if I may?’

The two sisters only nodded as Adarin turned his gaze to them. He closed his eyes.

‘Are you the Wingblade’s heir?’

Vandheer had not expected anything like that question. He took a moment to think about his answers, turning around towards the entrance.

‘Others claim that I am.’

‘Well then. Are you truly Vandheer Nillis, the last of the Nexus?’

‘I doubt anyone else survived.’

‘Then I have only one question left. Did you know that the Nexus is the remnant of the army that the Wingblade slaughtered?’

Vandheer could only stare at the greybeard’s calm gaze. He was left speechless.

‘I suppose not. Now, would you offer me a drop of your blood?’

‘What?’ Vandheer exclaimed. The priest said it as if it was the most casual thing in the world.

‘Blood is precious, young man, and it is vital. Likewise, this water will show you something of equal significance. Cutting yourself will prove necessary, unless…’

Adarin quieted down as Vandheer stepped up to the basin. He held up his hand and covered his right eye. He stopped breathing while he closed it. He wiped his right eye swiftly as he opened it, gasping for air, and dipped his stained hand into the water. The blood dissolved in the white liquid swiftly. What came next was beyond Vandheer’s expectations.

The water turned black and escaped from the basin, flying in all directions. It moved everywhere in the air, along any surface. The splashing was endless, and before Vandheer had realized it, the black water had covered the room’s surfaces completely and was overflowing. It was as if more water had appeared out of nowhere. As everyone finally grasped what had just happened and no longer kept moving around in the water, the black water and its dark reflection kept changing, and the waves moved even across the walls, while the white light from the basin remained. The sentinels already had swords unsheathed, looking in every direction for any possible movement.

‘By the lord of the skies…’ The priest was only barely standing, supporting himself by the basin.

Vandheer looked around for any changes in the black water. He held his hand up towards the ceiling, and closed his eyes.

‘What are you doing?’ Xena asked.

He shut out everything from his mind. He heard nothing. There was only him, and the black water. Vandheer tried to reach out to it as he had done with the moisture in the air, and found that it rejected him. He shot deadly fire towards the ceiling from his hand, but it scattered on contact, dying out swiftly. He didn’t need to open his eyes for this.

He thought about what to do, as the sounds of voices around him failed to capture his attention. The water rejected fire, interference, but also contact through itself. He couldn’t bring the water closer, or move it with wind either. He had no contact with the ground, as if the black water blocked him off. He wondered if he truly had to use his other powers.

Leila didn’t say anything while the priest and the sisters argued. She was completely immersed in whatever it was that Vandheer was doing.

The fire that had erupted from his hand did nothing to the black water. When wind had begun to blow, it ended as abruptly as it had come, and the basin had shaken slightly once, for whatever reason. What came next reminded her of just what powers she would have to deal with, at some point.

The light from the basin still kept the room lit, but something was completely off about Vandheer’s shadow. Where the black water reflected the light, it stopped to do so around his shadow. She realized immediately that Vandheer stopped the light from reflecting. The reflections vanished around his shadow, and it kept expanding, until the black water was just a black, moving mass. The reflection that was supposed to be on the watery surface, vanished from the cave.

All of a sudden, Leila felt as if something was pushing her towards the ground. She felt it everywhere across her body, how she struggled to remain on her feet. Everything was shaking. The black water, which only reached her feet, began to move, splashing when waves hit her. She heard someone fall into the water and looked around. The sentinels helped the priest up from his knees, and Leila couldn’t help noticing how the black water didn’t wet him at all. Then she saw what was going on around Vandheer.

Black water was rising around him, spinning furiously. She was about to call his name, but when the black water formed spikes going outwards from him, she went down on her knees instantly. The water attempted to return to him, but even the spiral that surrounded him was moving further away. The tremors strengthened.

‘Get down on the floor!’ one of the sentinels shouted. The black water was everywhere, splashing violently. The menace that encircled Vandheer didn’t stop.

Leila desperately tried to remember everything she had been taught, and pointed her hand towards Vandheer. She could barely see the white threads she was forming in front of her hand, even less the pattern. She had to do it blindly with all the water flying across the cave. She could only hope that her practice would pay off.

Six symbols within a ring, a triangle at the center of the circle. Five rhombuses at the edges of the rotating ring, attached at the center of each rhombus, with intersecting lines from each of their centers, into each other. New layer – a pyramid, each side formed as a triangle, base facing the original circle. A sphere within it, with an internal and rotating rhombus, additionally a plane to separate the sphere into two hemispheres. The rhombus gradually turned its tip to the middle of the top of the pyramid, which rotated at an accelerating rate. One final circle in front of the original ring and just a bit larger. A single square within it. She cut off the excessive threads to separate the circles, and finish them.

The circles accelerated and contracted briefly. A white ray of light exploded from her hand, hitting the black water which now surrounded Vandheer completely. The spikes came back, attempting to push back the light. Leila could barely keep her arm steady, and was about to collapse. The black vortex expanded briefly, but did it repeatedly, until it was clearly expanding slowly. Out of nowhere she heard an otherworldly shriek, piercing through the black vortex. White light came through the brief openings, which expanded as well. The black water was fading away, but it kept whirling even faster. It suddenly contracted itself into a solid pillar. The black water that had once coated the room was all gone, collected into the one mass, which proceeded to explode across the room as pure water.

Leila felt her strength fade. She couldn’t feel her legs; no muscles in her body obeyed her orders. She drifted into the darkness of unconsciousness right after she saw Vandheer’s silhouette lying on the floor.

Xena Lufar had been taught many things during her lifetime. Where she had silently made careful observations alongside being taught, her sister, Kryvis, had added opinions and speculations. Especially once they found out that they were, indeed, sisters by blood.

Originally, Xena had been raised in the conditions of an unfortunate commoner – her father was her only relative, and outside of that she only had one or two friends to play with, until the day she had accidentally set her house on fire. She had answered to her father more than ten times that she did not set it on fire. The day after, when they were en route to the Sanctum of Light, her father had stared at someone who later turned out to be his former wife and Xena’s mother. They continued after Xena asked if they were there yet.

After being enrolled into the Order of Light as an apprentice, Xena’s father had gone to live somewhere close to Sylus, in case she ever needed him to come on a whim. He had always been supportive, and cared more about her than anyone else on the face of the earth. At the test, he had been calmer than most parents, apparently. When Xena had set fire to an entire haystack just by touching it, most parents would be afraid of claiming that they had such a child.

Then there was the day that Kryvis was also enrolled, about four years later, after causing quite the ruckus by frying a chicken alive in the middle of a shop. She had been one of the few to accidentally discover her ability in an unintended manner, and like Xena, turned out to be prodigious, and then comparisons were made on their similarity, first of all on their appearances, then how they both had similar powers, as well as their discovery of their power being quite similar. They both had an affinity for fire. It wasn’t until Kryvis’ mother had come, that they knew anything about their relation. She had stared at Xena, asking where “he” was.

It was far from any happy reunion – their parents had been in conflict for a long time, and father had escaped with Xena while mother was pregnant. They eventually settled for that they would not meet each other under any circumstances, and when the Order found out, put Xena and Kryvis together in the same room. At first it had been awkward, but the result was that they both lived with it as a fact, not a relation. They were sisters by blood, but it meant little to them.

Xena had found one useful thing however, about the many speculations that Kryvis made – she could find new correlations, and even if they didn’t make sense at first, they could become useful one way or another. And now was the time for that.

She got up on her feet as she looked around. Whatever remained of the black water, she couldn’t see it even with an orb of light to vanquish the shadows. Aldruin and Barthas helped the old priest get up on his feet, and Kryvis was trying to wake up Leila, and was having difficulties doing so.

The spell Leila had formed was impressive, but the amazing part was that she had formed it on a whim. Xena recognized the one she had used as a base as well as the amplifier, but the one in front of it all was beyond anything Xena had been taught while she was an apprentice. Being able to accelerate spells at that rate would have been highly difficult for an average Sister. Whatever it was that Leila learned, Kryvis probably had a better idea of how she learned them. Still, the pyramid and its internals were rather intriguing – using a single structure to gain the effects of multiple ones, and even multiples of such shapes, required fine management and drastic acceleration. Its structural complexity wasn’t more complicated than what was required of a Sister, but the difficulty to actually utilize such a powerful spell was high indeed.

‘She truly is an amazing apprentice, wouldn’t you say so?’

Barthas had gone to Leila, and was about to lift her up on his shoulder. Aldruin was careful not to let his rough voice be heard by anyone else. Kryvis had already gone to check on Vandheer.

‘I suppose. Then again, she was saved by dirges.’

She went towards the old priest, who had gone back to the water basin. He looked like he was studying something inside of it, until Xena could see that he was wondering why it was empty. He seemed to be completely unshaken from what had just happened.

‘… and for the crystal water to be reduced into a malicious liquid, his blood has to be stained. Obviously he did not control it…’ his voice drifted off as he noticed her coming closer.

‘What was the crystal made of?’ Xena asked. Adarin dug through a pocket and fished out a scroll.

‘The crystal was made from the bones of bred and endangered species, coated with enchanted liquids and then left to crystallize, and made by the Order itself for purposes and uses unknown. Sounds like something you should know about, in all honesty,’ he replied, raising an eyebrow. He took a look at where Vandheer lied. Kryvis’s own orb of light hovered above him, moving above his body. He sighed.

‘But of course, it was in our possession. The basin itself is nothing but a catalyst. However, I fear that his blood will prove dangerous to meddle with. Even the way in which he extracted it was beyond my imagination. Have you ever seen someone shed tears of blood?’

‘I was equally surprised.’ The old man stared at her, baffled by her statement. Xena heard Aldruin picking Vandheer up on his shoulder.

‘Ha! I was shocked, my young lady... nonetheless, I believe he has bad blood in his veins. There can be no other explanation, but I cannot delve further into it. I see your guardians are eager to exit the tomb of Amon as well. And whatever curse that is laid upon him, you would do well to be cautious on your journey north, especially when you pass by the Great Rift. Something tells me you will visit dangerous places.’

The old priest went towards the passage they had entered from, while Xena made another orb of light accompany him. The door was closed, but after tapping it with his staff – which was in perfect condition, only lacking the crystal that had dissolved in the water.

‘I can tell from the contract – as well as this episode – that you are up to no good things, my lady. Why is it that you have brought the Wingblade’s heir to this place? Even if he is an Artiphex, what do you hope to gain? What is your purpose here, travelling northwards?’

Xena sighed. She knew the old man was only curious, but she was far from interested in answering his question. Besides that, the journey was already beginning to take its toll on her. She had travelled well beyond the Great Mountains before and past the kingdom of Elzraei, but travelling northwards was truly different, not to mention that this mission was completely different from anything she had ever experienced.

‘He’s being pulled north, and he feels it by his skin. Our leader herself ordered me directly to escort him to find whatever it is that he needs to find. She made a deal with him.’

‘Huh. I never expected the new High Priestess to make compromises, but we’ll see if she sees them through.’

‘His part is the one to be finished first.’

‘Ah. Then I fear for the lad’s future.’

‘Why is that?’

‘I was once indebted to the Order myself. Three favors were required from me, but I never expected anything like the first two, and this one much less. Oh, and is it correct that there is a new High Priestess?’

‘She was given the White Scepter three years ago. She’s the youngest one to have received it.’

‘And how will he repay you?’

‘She said he would have to serve us for a year.’

Adarin stopped right on the spot as he put the staff’s bottom firmly on the floor, and turned around with a forbidding expression.

‘That is a most arrogant thing to hope for. I would go as far as saying that it is stupid to demand such a thing, especially towards him!’ the priest exclaimed, turning his back to Xena once again, leading them towards the exit. She decided to listen before she made any objections.

‘For his blood alone to cause such chaos… and I do not even know what he has already done, or what he has been through. I can only imagine. You would be wise to warn your mistress, that indebting him may well prove to be the wrong choice. And whatever there is that you fear may happen, I will give you one warning: it is only a matter of time.’

Until they reached the exit and were outside of the marble temple, they had not said a single word to each other again. Xena decided they would stay at a mansion for tonight, within Amon’s Tomb.

‘Would the nobles here be willing to give us accommodation?’ she asked the old priest. Adarin turned only halfway around as he talked in a dull tone.

‘The white mansion would be the most suitable for your troupe. The Count is most generous with envoys from the Order.’

The priest went on his way towards the tomb’s exit. Xena glanced at her sentinel who was carrying Vandheer over his shoulder. The boy’s hair was well tied, but what still surprised Xena was the fact that it was that long. Her hair reached her breast, but she had never seen a man with his hair going anywhere past his neck. His hair reached well beyond that.

Kryvis came to her side. In spite of them being sisters, they had never been particularly close to each other. Neither one of them had a problem with that, but they knew each other better than anyone else could. Both of them had a fine relationship to both of their parents, but there wasn’t much of a family life in any case.

‘That priest really has a grudge.’

‘Well, the Order gives and takes.’

Her sister nodded as they walked on in silence towards the entry of the white mansion. The door was characteristically decorated with a heron standing atop a pedestal, guarding a building behind it. As the door opened, Xena told the servant that she wanted to meet the lord of the house. The reply came swiftly.

She had no expectations in mind, but the tall, lean man who came was dressed in a completely unremarkable fashion. Dressed in a black coat with an equally dark hat, along with dark leather shoes, it was hard to guess at first glance that it was the Count of Arkwise, otherwise known as a notoriously ill-behaved lord, while he was in fact quite engaged in civil matters. He lowered his glasses a bit, and raised his eyebrows before he spoke. He even wore black leather gloves. Xena would never have expected a new lord to be so free-spirited. Coating himself entirely in black was unheard of. His hair was as dark as could be.

‘My, my. I never expected to see Sisters by blood either. May I inquire as to what your business is?’

‘We need to stay somewhere quiet for the night, along with resupplying…’

‘… and anything useful here that you can find?’ He rounded off, giving her a suspicious look before it suddenly changed to a nonchalant expression. He raised his hands up in the air as he turned around to the corridor. He signaled for the servants to come.

‘Please, feel free to do so. My new life as a count is rather dull, if I am to be honest. And I find it quite convenient for you to knock on my door at this time as well, since I happen to have a profound interest in you. I’ll make sure the unconscious one is well treated. Come along! You may call me Arthur.’

Kryvis tapped on Xena’s shoulder to listen to her whisper.

‘Arrogant enough for a noble.’

‘He is young.’

The sentinels stepped along inside, while the servants went somewhere to bring a litter to put Vandheer on. They immediately went in another direction. Xena nodded to Aldruin, who went along with the servants.

As they followed the young lord, he explained several things about the city as well as the tomb that the House Arkwell had been guarding for four centuries, since they received the duty of protecting it. Many of the facts he mentioned were common teachings at the Order, and the most interesting one he came with was none other than the fact that in his bloodline, only he had a good relationship with the Order. Having accommodated Sisters ever since he first became the head of House Arkwell, he was perhaps the greatest asset that Whitefield’s leader had.

Which had eventually lead Kryvis to suggest something completely different from what he was known for – he might actually be a cunning strategist. The Order’s power rose in dire times, and even though that was unlikely to happen, the young lord was noted to be careful with serious matters.

He eventually led them to a lounge, where a maid just left a table with plenty of glasses. And at the end of the table, there were several opened bottles. The young count led them to the couches that surrounded the table, and filled up a glass to the middle of it. The liquid was dark red.

‘When was it, that drinking became forbidden among you?’ he asked.

‘About fourteen centuries ago, if memory serves me well,’ Xena replied. She could see the complete lack of interest in Kryvis’ eyes. ‘It was made a law after eons of doctrine however.’

‘Yes, and as for doctrine, I intend to make Whitefield a bit… shall we say, less complacent. You might think of this as a sudden change of topic, but I perceive this to be necessary. Now that I finally have one of the High Priestess’ retainers I believe you can enlighten me on this.’

The count revealed a scroll he had put in his pocket, and opened it. He put his eyes on it, and read it out loud. Xena had been put off a bit by his knowledge. It was not publicly known, even in the Order, that the High Priestess’ call was the only one that Xena listened to.

‘To the Count of Arkwise… His Holiness has not yet returned. We await a reply from Wingblade’s Fortress, where the meeting is held, but should any uproar occur, you are ordered to quell it and will be repaid in full for any losses. From the Fifth Council. Now, could you tell me the reason that the Fortress has called for a meeting, in the first place?’

‘That would be due to the disappearance of Elzraei’s royal family. Apparently they vanished like thin air.’

‘Indeed they did. Now, rumors travel with the wind, but for whatever reason, I’ve heard the Fortress has fallen as well.’

‘What?’

‘Some refugees were shouting in the streets the moment they came through the gates, claiming to be escapees from the Fortress guard. They said that the message must be spread. I’m surprised I haven’t heard anything from the Order, especially given my position. Of all things, I thought I’d be given the privilege of early knowledge. Turns out it has nothing to do with it.’

Xena found it an odd surprise. Already at the gates of Sylus, a soldier had mentioned that the Fortress had been attacked. Kryvis had promptly rejected it, but the count had her attention now as well. This couldn’t be any coincidence.

‘That rumor still lives on?’

‘Ah, so you’ve already heard of it elsewhere. I’m afraid however, if a rumor lives long enough, I cannot allow myself to consider it false. Besides that, some of the people who have apparently escaped from the Fortress were so obsessed with it that they were put behind iron bars, deemed to be madmen. Should you request it however, I can bring one or two here for an inquiry and whatnot.’

The count was no fool, not by any measure. Whatever rumors ran about, he made perfect use of them – Arthur Arkwise used them to cover who he truly was, and make his own moves while leaving everyone in the dark about him. Why have spies inside the house of an apparent fool? Kryvis’ suggestion of him being arrogant seemed to be a bit exaggerated. He was a proud man, but Xena could see reasons for that now. He used everything he had at his disposal. She wondered if he would use them, before the Order began to use him first. She imagined he would attempt to negotiate, to begin with. Whatever followed that would depend on his ability.

‘Have one here by midday, tomorrow. We wish to rest first.’

‘As the lady commands, then,’ the count replied, getting up on his feet. ‘There is no such thing as easy paperwork, I’m afraid, so I shall take my leave. Enjoy your stay, Sisters.’

# Games

X

ena was surprised by how the sunlight still managed to reach parts of Amon’s Tomb. The windows in Count Arkwise’s mansion allowed her to see the gaping holes in the mountain sides that gave way to the sunlight. Even though there were plenty of torches scattered everywhere within the bustling cavern city, the fact that the mountain had real, gaping holes in it was something she had not dared believe before she had seen it for herself. She sat down on one of the chairs around the table in the middle.

As she waited for her sister and Vandheer to enter the lounge, she took note of Leila’s condition. Her eyes were weary, and she could barely hold them open for a few seconds. She was completely unable to keep her head even, and had slumped down on the chair she sat on, covered by a blanket. Even though Xena wouldn’t have claimed it was possible, Leila looked even paler than usual.

‘Where did you learn about powerful spells like the one from yesterday?’

‘I… have read about many things. I’ve also seen many prophecies, and I’ve managed to remember even the shortest moments in them.’

‘And how did you figure them out?’

‘I tried and I failed, until I saw a pattern, only to find that I didn’t understand them either. But I memorized what I learned nonetheless.’

Her voice was weak, and she couldn’t speak as smoothly as she usually did. Xena feared they had to stay for at least three days, so that Leila could get time to restore. She recognized Leila’s state, and it wasn’t anything worse than exhaustion. The one difference was that she had exhausted her spirit as well as her body. The strain of forming a spell such as she had was to be expected. Whatever the dark water had been, she had purified it completely, but collapsed after it was cleansed.

‘What was it that you were learning again? Those obscure and ancient arts.’

‘All kinds of techniques that have faded or remain arts few practitioners know… voiding arts, distortion, transmutation… even healing arts beyond what we learn.’

‘And which of these will be useful to us?’

Leila’s eyes barely twitched, but Xena could see that she was a bit hesitant about answering. Only her eyes gave her away.

‘Seals.’

It didn’t come as a surprise.

‘And how would your recently formed spell compare to seals?’

‘Seals are beyond anything both you and I learned from the time we were apprentices, and anything we’ve learned shortly after that,’ Kryvis answered, as she came in through the open door to the lounge. ‘Even a simple seal made to lock a door requires the precision we had at the time we became true members of the Order. Any seal that goes beyond physical objects require the person to have an ability you’d find only in prophecies… isn’t that so, Leila?’

The flaxen-haired girl nodded as she closed her eyes, apparently dozing off. Xena didn’t have anything more she wanted to know, and guessed that Kryvis wasn’t too interested in anything from her either.

As they waited for Vandheer as well as the prisoner, Xena thought about Vandheer’s powers. So far, she hadn’t seen him use any of them consciously. The time when he had collapsed, they had found bits of dirt miles away. If his power could reach so far with that magnitude, she wondered what he could achieve in close quarters, where his powers would be exponentially stronger. She had yet to see him use Darkness in any great manner. She vividly remembered how the Chamber of Light had been dimmed, and apparently he had only released his power. If he restrained himself constantly, she wondered what he was capable of, in the heat of a confrontation. Maybe the High Priestess had sent Leila along to prevent anyone from learning just that.

Kryvis looked out the window, towards the holes where sunlight pierced through the mountain. She disliked the place, as well as the count. He was smug, probably calculating as well, and sly. A devious, planning man with purposes left unknown for anyone but himself and maybe a confidential friend who’d always be close by to keep him company, so he could hear himself talk.

She had checked Vandheer when she entered and woken him up. He had been fairly cooperative, surprisingly. At first glance, he didn’t look too strong, but when she had told him to remove his shirt she had been impressed. She didn’t know if he just lacked any fat at all or if he was actually strong, but when Barthas had said that he had gotten up to the roof of that inn, she understood that his looks wouldn’t give any logical explanation. She would just have to see for herself what he was capable of. He had been a bit annoyed by her need to see him half naked though. He was still just a boy as far as Kryvis was concerned.

As the sentinels came with Vandheer right behind them, the prisoner arrived just seconds later, wrists locked together, handled by two well-sized men. The prisoner wore black rags stained with dirt, with the tarnished emblem of the Fortress on his chest. She guessed he used to be a servant of some sort due to his clothes, but the man’s face was anything but that of a servant. He was probably in his forties, but he looked like he had seen death itself welcoming him to the afterlife, and then been tossed back into life after a quick visit, and come back looking like he was a decade older. The count came in just before the door was closed.

‘Ah, I see everyone has arrived. Now, is there anything more that I may provide?’

‘That you keep everything related to us a secret, Count Arkwise,’ Kryvis responded. The count promptly nodded before exiting through the door again. She signaled for the two prisoner guards to exit the room. They would probably wait outside. Once they left, she sealed off any sound they’d make within the room. She nodded to her sister once she was done with the hex.

‘So, you used to live in Wingblade’s Fortress, did you?’ she asked the prisoner. He looked up, displaying what she’d called nervousness in its finest example yet to be seen.

‘Y-yes, my lady.’

‘Don’t call me lady or anything. Just answer our questions. Now, what made you flee the Fortress?’

‘Death. Murderers. Buildings set on fire, monsters, demons, chaos. Dead bodies scattered across the streets. I had to run away. I couldn’t stand any of it anymore. The streets were littered with corpses and stained with blood. I saw bodies cut to pieces, others looking like something had been halfway eaten. A monster came to me and stared at me with the eye in his hand. I’ve dreamt about it every night. I can’t sleep anymore without seeing it all. Please, I beg you, release me from this nightmare! You must help me!’

The man talked rapidly and made no attempt to hide his feelings. He was desperate, but Kryvis had a hard time believing anything of what he was saying. Monsters, in the Fortress? What nonsense was he speaking? If anything, she would have believed that he was part of a group which was trying to spread fear and chaos.

‘You’re just a liar,’ she concluded. She looked away from him and out the window again. What was this world coming to? It had enough fools as it was. That she had one as her father was frustrating enough. She heard the man go down on his knees. He laid his head on the floor.

‘I beg of you, please release me from my visions! I can’t forget them, I see them in my sleep, I cannot live like this! I’d rather die!’

‘We should see how you sleep then. Maybe you just happen to fall off your bed.’

The man began to sob. He didn’t stop begging her to free him from whatever nightmare he had. He sounded more like a madman now, which he had been sent to prison for. She didn’t turn around to respond until he had quieted down.

‘I saw people die in front of my eyes… I saw my family eaten alive, my only child screaming as the fires took her… I see all of it every night… I’ll do anything for you…’

Kryvis’ sister met her gaze. She supposed she couldn’t deny that the prisoner was actually honest, but she had no idea what to do for the man. To free him from nightmares was one thing, but he wouldn’t be able to recover from his losses. She couldn’t help thinking that he should perhaps just die instead, to end his pain.

He stepped closer to the man, lifting her left hand. She formed a long, white thread in front of her, and began to shape it. The prisoner had no tears left, and was blankly staring at her feet until she poked his head and was ready to alter his memory.

‘You will not be able to recall any images or sounds from that time, but you will know what happened there. That is all I can do for you. Do you want this?’

‘Thank the Light, yes, thank you…’

‘Fulfill your promise now then. Tell us what exactly happened at Wingblade’s Fortress. I will do this when your part of the deal is done. You won’t be able to recall any images or sounds from what happened there after you’re finished, but you will live with the knowledge.’

‘Thank you… excuse me…’ the prisoner cleared his tears from his face, and signaled that he wanted some water from the jug on the table. Xena filled it up for him. At first Kryvis would have expected her to let the water flow through the air into a cup, but she figured that there was no need to surprise the man in any manner whatsoever. Vandheer sat silently, his mind apparently somewhere else. Leila looked like she had fallen asleep.

‘I was a servant at Wingblade’s Fortress, in service to the Chancellor. The High Rule had a gathering concerning the recently missing royal family in the far west. I was about to come with refreshments, but when I found the corpses, and heard the screams from the meeting hall… I ran away. I had to inform someone of what had just happened. By the time I came outside the castle however, there were corpses everywhere I went. Down in the city I heard screams from afar, and there was fire, and I saw monsters I never imagined could exist. The rest… excuse me, but I do not believe there is anything more you need to hear.’

Kryvis took a moment to imagine what the Fortress must have been like.

‘Who did the screams in the castle come from?’

‘The highest lords of every nation, I believe, my lady.’

Kryvis stared at the man. She doubted if she should clear his memory. He was back to the nonsensical part.

‘I can’t believe I thought you were honest,’ she said, turning around to face the window.

‘Please! I beg you, believe me!’

Kryvis looked blankly at the back of the prisoner’s head. He had gone on his knees again.

‘The man is speaking the truth,’ Vandheer said. Both Kryvis and Xena turned their faces to him. ‘I’m surprised you haven’t felt the taint within him. Even I can feel it.’

‘And why should we be able to feel this taint?’ Kryvis asked him promptly.

‘I’m sensitive to Light, but I can still feel Darkness if I want to. Your case should be the opposite. You just didn’t bother to delve into him.’

Even though she didn’t want to admit it, he was right about her currently not being able to feel anything. One thing she didn’t expect was the fact that he felt Light even when neither her, Xena or Leila made any attempt to show it, but rather every effort to hide it. He was sensitive on another level than them. Kryvis proceeded to purposefully strengthen her Light, and focused it as she held her hand above the prisoner’s head.

She felt it now. It was a pulsating taint, relieved only by his anticipation of release. It was attempting to reject her glow. Kryvis proceeded to relieve the man immediately of his memories. She erased all of what had happened until he no longer remembered anything visual or any sounds from the Fortress. She had heard enough now. Her sister’s gaze met her own as they realized what had happened and they sent the man out of the door.

The High Rule had fallen.

Xena looked up at the sun. She still couldn’t get it out of her thoughts.

The High Rule was no more. And the Order had done nothing to prevent it, nor had it been aware of it. And she had no way of knowing if anyone there knew it had happened, or if everyone else there considered it nonsense like she and her sister initially had believed.

‘I’ve never felt such a thing in my entire life. The taint was literally alive.’

Kryvis kept repeating it. It was as if she couldn’t accept that magic could be alive. Neither Kryvis nor Xena had been taught anything about magic having a will of its own, but this was completely against their belief. Magic was just a tool. Now they had something which contradicted that belief.

‘We should go soon in any case. We have our orders,’ Xena said. She wasn’t going to try and calm down her younger sister. She was as independent as any woman could be, and was also hard to have any effect on. If anything, the only influence Xena had was that Kryvis didn’t reject her opinion. Of course, the same could be said for her sentinel, Barthas. Aldruin was accompanying Vandheer and Leila, whatever they were doing. She hoped they would get done with their business and come back.

‘Do you think there is anything more that we don’t know? Come to think about it, we were never taught anything about Darkness. And what do we do when he decides to show what he’s capable of?’

‘I don’t know. But as Leila showed us, she was well capable of fighting that black water. We need to look out for what his blood is capable of. The High Priestess said he could heal up a cut in seconds.’

‘If anything more upsetting happens before we’re done, then I’m going to have questions.’

Xena looked up at the sky to the north. Ever since Vandheer had collapsed in the fields, where they had found scattered bits of dirt miles away, they had seen a grey sky.

‘It is as Adarin said – it’s only a matter of time.’

Vandheer tried to force the image out of his mind. Ever since they had been within Amon’s Tomb, he hadn’t been able to get rid of the blasted images of what he had seen in there, or the sounds he had heard.

*The black water was spinning in a spiral around him. The sound of it splashing everywhere made him unable to hear anything else, until it died without warning. What came in its stead was a voice he had heard before. The black water covered everything now, he was in total darkness.*

*‘Yes… witness their fall, behold as you descend to my power!’*

*Echoes of the voice’s words died slowly, until it returned.*

*‘What are you doing here? Who are you to interfere? Get out of my sight, vermin!’*

*In spite of what he would call total darkness, he thought he could make out a silhouette. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he knew it was a man. He heard the same voice, but there was a slight change, as if there was a whisper at the same time.*

*‘You… why have you returned? Why aren’t you taken yet? What is it that…’*

*His voice became impossible to hear as Vandheer heard an increasingly loud screech piercing his ears. A spear of light pierced through the darkness around him. More holes in the dark was made, all of them made of white light, until the darkness was gone.*

*When the light left him, he fell immediately*.

Whatever had happened inside of the black water, he had no idea what any of it meant.

Leila tugged at his arm, and their eyes met. Her flaxen hair and sky blue eyes were difficult for his mind to accept.

‘What were you thinking about this time then?’ she said.

They had gone to a library which Count Arkwise happened to own. Vandheer wasn’t quite sure if he wanted to tell Leila that he could actually remember what had happened back then, and that he had practically been in another world as far as he was concerned.

‘Nothing,’ he replied. She had looked like she was frantically searching for anything regarding the recent events, and went to another library instead, despite that the two Sisters were waiting for them. He could still feel the pull, turning his gaze north spontaneously sometimes, without being aware of it.

‘You keep looking north.’

‘I told you it’s getting stronger. We need to go. These libraries obviously can’t help you as much as those in the Sanctum.’

Vandheer decided to leave the library on his own, but he knew that Leila would follow him as soon as he moved, which she in turn did. The librarian told them they would be welcome to return at any time until midnight.

*You are part of my studies, in a way.*

‘I’ll probably have to do some things as we travel anyway. I doubt we’re going to get past everything without any trouble,’ she said.

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘The High Rule is gone. I can imagine what kind of tensions arises.’

‘What do you know about it?’

‘It was an alliance formed by all of the nations, apparently, and the ties between the members have grown loose over time, to the degree of having meaningless emissaries.’

‘Who told you that? You were completely uninterested in anything besides that pull of yours, back in the Sanctum.’

‘Oh, I’ve been hearing things here and there, as I travelled east.’

‘And did you use your powers back then?’

Vandheer hesitated, before he nodded. As they exited the deeper part of the city and came to the highway, Kalderon’s Road, Vandheer wanted to pick up the pace, until he noticed a crowd ahead of them, which kept growing.

‘Vandheer?’

As he came closer, he discovered it was a public execution on top of a small platform. People of all ages, in rags or fine clothing, had come to watch. Some were arguing among themselves, others disgusted, and a few were in anticipation. A surprising amount of people were protesting against the execution. Vandheer wasn’t sure what to make of it. The victim of the crime was apparently a child who had been murdered by the one about to be executed.

The man who was about to be executed was covered with a bag over his head, which had an open patch for his mouth. The announcer was dressed in a simple, black tunic with a seal emblazoned on him, which Vandheer had no idea whom it belonged to. The executioner, who held a large sword, was masked too, but also dressed in very loose rags, to hide his identity. The guards fastened his head and wrists on a stock, and took their places on the edges of the platform. None of it seemed out of place, it looked more like a common procedure. What shocked Vandheer was that he had seen the dirty emblem on the convict’s chest before. He also recognized those rags.

As the announcer read aloud the verdict, the crowd became completely silent, with the exception of a few whispers here and there. He proceeded to put the man in position for execution. The executioner raised his broadsword. The blade fell.

And it stopped, right before it would have cut the convicted man’s head off.

At first, there was confusion amongst the men on top of the platform. The crowd gasped, and started chattering. The executioner put his great broadsword away promptly, without hesitation or wondering why the sword hadn’t cut the convicted man’s head off, and picked up a huge, bloodstained, double-edged axe instead, and raised it swiftly. Vandheer could see the convicted one’s head move under the bag, surprised that he hadn’t died yet, probably wondering what all the chatter was about.

The axe stopped as well. This time however, there was a particular amount of chatter, which didn’t stop until Vandheer found himself alone in the middle of the road, with the crowd distancing from him.

He had raised his left arm toward the platform. The announcer was looking right at him. He could hear someone trying to break through the crowd, and saw Leila who stopped right as she came to the front of it. Her eyes were wide open as she pretended to only be a part of the crowd again. He knew she couldn’t do anything now. Vandheer turned his attention back to the announcer, who had stepped down from the platform. The soldiers who had formerly been in the platform rushed to surround Vandheer. They pointed spears and swords at him, their armor clinking as they took their positions. The announcer walked calmly to him, until they were four steps apart.

‘Who are you?’

He didn’t answer.

‘Why did you interrupt the execution?’

‘You’re executing an innocent man.’

‘And what proof do you have?’

‘I know that he’s from the Fortress. He escaped from there.’

‘Huh! And why should I believe you? You could be his accomplice for all I know. You’re not even from this country, are you?’

Vandheer heard the crowd chatter once the announcer mentioned that they had an outsider in the middle of the street. Plenty of them were asking each other were he came from.

‘That is not important. I know that man is innoce-‘

‘Enough!’ the announcer shouted, looking around at the crowd. Everyone around them were silenced completely.

‘Give me a reason why I shouldn’t execute you together with him.’

The soldiers stepped closer to him. He saw one of their shadows rise on the ground. Just as the shadow froze completely, the crowd gasped again.

‘You won’t,’ Vandheer answered.

The soldier behind Vandheer fell on the ground, dumbfounded at what had just happened. He looked at the soldier, through the slits in his helmet. Even as the soldier got back up on his feet, their eyes met. Vandheer let go of himself, then reinforced the power he had possessed for many years, yet never found any ideal purpose for. There was only one problem about it – he didn’t know its limits yet.

The one who had tried to cut him down from behind, backed off a little bit. Vandheer heard another soldier behind him step rapidly closer to him, then stopping completely. As he turned around, he found out it was the one with a spear – or at least, who used to be a spear. The spearhead was gone. Vandheer saw a small heap of fine dust right in front of his feet, placed along a curve.

The other soldiers futilely tried to attack him from behind, with the last one attempting to stab him front his front. The blades disintegrated into dust until the soldiers just barely managed to prevent themselves from entering the area where their weapons were changed into harmless objects.

‘What is this sorcery?! Kill the man!’ the announcer shouted. The soldiers around Vandheer however, hesitated. And then he saw it in their eyes – fear. As he looked around, he saw that even the citizens around him were fearful now.

Six blades had turned into dust the moment they were within a foot’s distance of him. Even parts of the shafts had been grinded. The soldiers stepped back. The announcer kept shouting at them, ordering them to kill Vandheer, but they would have none of it. They scattered in various directions. The crowd surrounding Vandheer and the announcer stepped a bit back, until the announcer began stepping towards the crowd.

‘You… you’ll pay for this!’

Vandheer restrained himself as he saw the announcer vanish in the crowd, running further and further away, until there was only the slightest sign of a man rushing through the crowd, far away.

Vandheer looked at the man whose head was still covered in a bag. He was still locked, and prepared for execution. Vandheer raised his hand, and clenched it. The wood stock fell apart, and the bag over the man’s head split. He was confused, until he saw Vandheer.

Leila was hesitant about stepping away from the crowd, but Vandheer was quick to notice her. He knew what she was trying to tell him, and followed her through the crowd as he felt thousands of stares on his back.

‘We shall leave immediately. Now that you’ve made a ruckus, there is no reason to delay any more,’ Xena stated. She turned to the gatekeeper, who in turn nodded to the guards on the top of the wall. The gate was unlocked, and pushed open by two guards on the ground.

‘May the Light watch over you, Sisters,’ the gatekeeper said, bowing his head. Xena lead them through the northern exit of Amon’s Tomb. While Leila had explained what happened, Vandheer had been completely silent, not made a single sound when his horse didn’t comply, and didn’t look at anyone. What concerned her was that he didn’t look like he was trying to ignore anyone – the emptiness in his eyes told her that he had done something disturbing. If dissolving swords to dust was disturbing to him, Xena couldn’t help suspecting that he wasn’t as tough as he’d like to think, but he was still a young man, and he had lived his whole life in a small area, although that place was full of magic.

As the capital of Whitefield distanced out behind them, Xena couldn’t keep her questions to herself anymore.

‘What were the Black Mountains like, Vandheer?’

‘What do you mean? The mountains or the village I grew up in?’

‘Everything.’

She looked at him as she waited for her answer, but realized quickly that he needed time for make one. He eventually looked up towards the grey sky in the north.

‘What difference would it make, if I told you?’

‘That would depend on your answer.’

He sighed in resignation. There was something with his gaze that she could hardly bear to look at. Looking into his blood red eyes, she felt a discomfort unlike any other. It was not remarkable in a sense of magnitude, but in its nature. It felt as if his gaze could pierce any surface and look into the soul of anyone, and more than that as well.

‘The Black Mountains are, as the name implies, mostly black, except for where the village is built, and a few select other places. In the night it is completely impossible to make out any surface in the black areas, unless the sky is clear and the full moon is there to light your way. In the summer it becomes a scorching hot place, and as such it becomes a common place to set challenges, one of which is to run a set distance back and forth barefoot. The worst part however, is that it is littered with rocks of various sizes, from fine sand to rocks the size of a man’s head. Some are sharp, others smooth. It’s hard enough to walk on hot ground, but watching where one steps at the same time, is another challenge. The one who finishes the challenge at the shortest time is the winner too, and as such you have three things to watch over – avoiding burns, sharp stones, and time. The one who loses has to suffer in some fashion, the most common one being having one of those stones in your hand for a while.’

Xena wondered if he was done yet, or if he was just having a pause. It turned out to be the latter.

‘Games, in the Black Mountains, were perceived as enjoyable through others’ suffering, until one day someone went too far. The challenge was the same, run somewhere on the scorched grounds and back in the fastest time possible, but the loser would have to hold a heated stone until it cooled down. For whatever reason, the winner forced the loser to do it, even after he was unable to hold the stone due to his hand having transformed to something unrecognizable. By the time an adult came, the loser had been beaten badly, to make up for that he couldn’t hold the stone while until it cooled down. As a result… no children were allowed to touch the black rocks ever again. Having finally acknowledged the danger that they were, all children were also forced to wear footwear whenever they went outside, and in summer time, particularly shoes made with wood, were enforced. Ever since, dangerous games were forbidden.’

While it was a question Xena did not like asking, she felt as if Vandheer was leading up to it. He looked back at her this time, when she looked into his eyes.

‘What about lethal ones?’

‘Those were games for adults, as they would say. In reality it was between men who hated each other. Children learned it as a game called “playing with fire”, until they realized it was only a moniker for duel to the death. By then we’d call it a dance of death. It was never official, of course. We simply knew that it would happen between those who hated each other – when everyone learns to use their powers it is inevitable that some use them for unintended purposes. The most common reason for learning magic was so it would be passed on, as our heritage, the second being that it was convenient to have these powers. Our society, while it relied on mutuality, functioned, with the exception one or two problematic individuals who made sure to kill the source of problems. At its worst, we gathered to decide on what to do with troublemakers, particularly after one had killed the other. We knew perfectly well that solving one problem with another was not a real solution. The most common punishment was conditional exile, which proved to be largely successful, as it made them quiet down. Death was the verdict for the worst among us, but if they begged for it, they would be exiled and rendered powerless, forced to live a new life in a world they had never known.’

‘And this society never changed, otherwise?’

‘The child who lost his hand, died many centuries ago. The verdicts for adults have remained the same for even longer. From what I learned, our society has been isolated for more than a thousand years, but its people have existed for longer.’

‘Do you know how for many millennia the Artiphex have existed, Vandheer Nillis?’ Kryvis asked. Xena could see perfectly well that her sister was disapproving, even though Vandheer had no way of knowing much about his ancestry – it was too old to be recorded through word of mouth. He remained silent.

‘Your race has existed for at least three thousand years. The first testimony that even hinted at the existence of humans with monstrous traits or abilities was made two hundred years earlier than that.’

He remained completely unaffected by anything that had been said.

‘Is any of this significant?’

‘A bit of enlightenment has never done any harm,’ Xena replied, looking back at the rest of the group. Kryvis had already lost interest in him again. Leila, on the other hand, was practically staring at Vandheer, although without any particular expression. Aldruin and Barthas were stone-faced as usual.

‘Besides that, you said it yourself – the Black Mountains have been isolated for a long time. Not even the Order knows much about the place.’

While Xena was perfectly aware that she wasn’t doing much to hide the intention of her questions, she had a vague feeling that Vandheer knew, and yet didn’t care about what the Order wanted. His gaze was so focused, locked on the unnatural grey skies to the north.

‘There are reasons for that,’ he said, grinning. ‘The Order never came to visit.’

As simple as it was, that was probably the sole reason why the Black Mountains had remained in its state. Yet, Xena wondered how no one had decided to.

‘Did outsiders *ever* visit the Black Mountains?’ Xena asked.

‘None that I can remember. Most likely they wouldn’t even be able to reach the plateau. No one left, no one came. In a way, I used to live in another world, though I can’t say I miss it.’

‘Why don’t you?’

He didn’t react to her question at all. Vandheer looked like his mind was complete absent, until his mouth opened, but no words came out at first.

‘I was alone.’

Xena didn’t know what to make out of such a short explanation, but she figured that she shouldn’t prod any more. His expression was devoid of any emotion.

Time passed by as they made their way northwards. The vast field barely changed – there were hills here and there, the occasional tree dotting the landscape. By the time sunset was about to come, they weren’t too far away from a forest. Aldruin was holding his horse’s bridle in one hand, while looking at the map in his other.

‘We have passed the border between Whitefield and Avarin. We could pass through the Forest of Avarin, although it is historically a suspicious place. It might be a couple of days faster than circling around however.’ Aldruin met Xena’s gaze. She nodded to him, and he led the way.

‘What is this forest?’ Vandheer asked. He pointed towards one of the trees that pointed out on top of the rest. Xena took a moment to think of an answer.

‘It is told that seemingly random incidents take place here more often than not. Some trees have fallen over, killing people who passed by the forest, but there were never any signs of them having been touched by anyone. Trespassers who had their eyes damaged by a branch poking out, fallen off their horse, slipped on the ground and breaking a limb or two – everything would seem like an accident, except for that these things happen too often to be accidental. The likeliness of these incidents *not* happening is as likely as them happening outside of the forest. You’d think it flips your chances of misfortune upside-down.’

Vandheer stared at the distant forest entry for a moment - a clear cut path, wide enough for a convoy, waited ahead of them. A gust of wind eerily passed by as he eventually turned his attention back to Xena. She just noticed that he was riding his horse notably better now than before.

‘Why are we entering it again?’

‘Even in the case that this forest is magical, which no one knows for sure, it poses no real threat to us, don’t you think?’

# Mist

The first thing about the forest that unsettled Leila was the enormous trees that popped out among all the others. She had seen great, old trees that were centuries old, but none of those were comparable to the ones they stumbled across here, since these grew primarily in height, whereas the eldest ones at the Sanctum had grown many thick and smooth branches in all directions. At the base, these trees’ width could equal that of two men’s height. It required an effort to try looking at the top of the tree, where the branches were finally visible.

Nothing had happened yet as they traversed through the forest – there was a clear trail to follow, and while they didn’t have much time left until night fell upon them, they made the most of it. The path was mostly dark, solid dirt , which turned to a brighter hue at times, like a road that had been paved by thousands of footsteps. The trees that were deeper in the forest were typical – they were bare at the lower parts except for old, persistent branches that hadn’t broken off yet and, gained a cover of green leaves, or needles, only at the tallest section.

When she was learning about places affected by magic, the Forest of Avarin had been mentioned a couple of times, even though none had ever confirmed that it was magical. It was the forest where a notorious religious man had visited many times, but it was also the place where he vanished completely. Some claimed to have found his body, but it was completely unrecognizable at that time – a week of rotting and scavenging had gone by, and the inhabitants of the forest had already enjoyed their meal. Eventually the stories about the fanatic’s corpse faded, and people who entered it followed the same fate. There were those who tried to find the missing individuals, only to join their numbers instead, at some point, if not instantly. People who tried to solve the mystery were bound to enter the forest, and the number of the forest’s victims increased. The forest was eventually named after the zealot who had ventured the most in it, and warnings had since been put in the surrounding area as well. No stories concerning Avarin’s Forest came by, once it was known to be cursed – whoever went missing, was a fool most people didn’t care to remember.

In short, it was practically like a folktale. Whether the forest was still cursed or not, however, was for them to discover. While Leila hadn’t noticed anything yet, Vandheer turned his head often enough, sometimes with a slightly suspicious glance.

‘Is something wrong?’ she asked him.

‘I can count on my two hands how many times I’ve been in a forest, but I’ve never been in such a lifeless one.’

They passed a few trees that had roots sticking up from the ground. Most of them were bare at this level, keeping their branches at the top.

‘It’s only quiet here, what makes you think this forest is dead?’

‘Did I say it was dead?’

They stopped in their tracks and turned to Vandheer. Kryvis was already somewhat provoked.

‘I don’t think anything living has been here for a while,’ Vandheer stated.

‘So you believe that this forest has been untouched?’

‘I’d say that everything living that stepped into this forest vanished without leaving a trace of ever having been here.’

The sun drifted towards the horizon slowly as they continued on the trail north. The Sisters had dismissed Vandheer’s statement, and the sentinels promptly took the lead. They came across an intersection, with four other paths. There was an old wooden sign standing in the middle of the small open area, but whatever was written had faded long ago. The writings were completely unintelligible.

‘Two of the paths lead north, but our map does not show the forest trails,’ Aldruin said. Xena looked at Leila, who was already prepared for her question.

‘With all those ancient arts you learned, could you find the way?’

‘I can do that… but I will need a bit of space.’

As they all stepped aside, Leila took some time to position herself in the middle of the crossroads, and raised her left hand in front of her, facing north. Thin, white threads formed above her palm, growing outwards and onto the ground, splitting up into five separate bundles around her. The white threads went dim and illuminated themselves every few seconds, as to show how each path progressed. The left path led to one fork after the other, while the path on the right side, which seemed to go northeast, bent off southwards again. The two paths that led directly north were relatively straight, until they began circling around a small area and unified when they met. Then there was the path they had just come from.

‘Looks like it doesn’t matter then,’ one of the sentinels stated. Aldruin led them towards the split, but stopped once he stood in front of it, looking down on the right path, studying it for a few seconds before he turned to face Xena.

‘There are footprints here, mistress. They don’t look too old, considering that it was raining a few days ago. Probably made by a lone man, hard to tell how long ago however.’

‘So we aren’t alone in this place,’

‘Indeed… but the troubling thing is that those footsteps come from further down the path, and they turn back from this spot as well. Perhaps someone is lost in these woods?’ Aldruin asked.

‘Forget about it. Our objective lies in the north, not in this forest,’ Kryvis said, eyeing her sister. Leila doubted that Xena would consider a detour, but even so, this forest was supposed to be abandoned. According to Vandheer, it was completely devoid of life at all, and now they had reason to doubt that – the forest where visitors vanished suddenly turned out to have an inhabitant.

‘North it is,’ Xena exhaled, guiding her steed towards the path on the left. The sentinels made sure to be at the front and back of their troupe, vigilantly looking out for them.

The trail swung slightly at times, in part due to steep ridges, but mostly due to the enormous tree trunks that dotted the forest. As the sun was eventually covered by the forest, Leila remembered that the imagery of the paths didn’t give any good leads as to where they could rest for the night. There were ways for her to find out how the immediate surroundings were formed, but she had rarely been outside of the Sanctum. Plenty of her spells changed in accordance to her environments – she was used to structured areas, not forests, and she couldn’t tell how far her abilities could extend. She had tested her abilities sometimes, but not like this.

‘Can we stop for a bit? I could try to find a place for us to rest.’

‘Take your time, then,’ Xena replied.

Leila knelt and put her hand on the ground. The same white threads enveloped her hand. They began circling around her, and expanded in one swift motion, into what would otherwise be a copy of the forest. She had to make them adapt to the ground only, ignore uneven surfaces like trees and rocks, and show the nearby area. As Leila adjusted the precision and the power she put into the vivid image, she looked at the environment it created. There was a hole which her white threads passed by. It reminded her of how this precise spell had worked, back in the Sanctum.

‘Could it be a pond?’ Kryvis asked.

‘I think it is. This spell was actually made for finding water.’

‘Then there might be a good place to rest, nearby. Get on your horses. Aldruin, go ahead and search for it,’ Kryvis ordered. Xena gave a silent nod to her sentinel before he rode off ahead of them.

As the sun’s light began to fade, the skies grew gained a crimson hue, except for the further northern clouds. As Leila had predicted, they had come near a sizeable pond. The sentinels swiftly went on to fetch some firewood, while the rest of them sat down close to the pond. Vandheer was sitting with his feet in the water, staring at the still waters.

‘Leila, could you prepare some tea?’

Normally, Xena wouldn’t ask of someone else to make her tea for her, but she had matters to discuss for tonight, and she was fairly certain it would last for some time. The young girl nodded, and knelt down beside the pile of firewood. With a single finger’s touch, a fire emerged, and began to feed off of the logs. She found a pack of leaves among the saddlebags and went to fetch some water.

Like herself, Kryvis wouldn’t ask others to do simple things for her – she promptly gave Xena a disapproving look. She dismissed it.

‘Vandheer, could you come here for a bit?’ Xena asked him. He didn’t turn around initially, but after looking at the night sky for a few seconds, he stood up, feet wet, and sat down near the fire, completely stone-faced. He looked quite focused once his eyes settled on the fire, however. He proceeded to bring out a small, shining stone, covered by a piece of cloth. Once he removed it, the light was slightly startling at first. The raw strength of its light was unexpected, but she paid no heed to it.

‘You’ve been rather silent after we entered this forest,’ she stated. He turned his eyes to her.

‘I thought you were going to ask me more questions.’

‘We are human beings too, although it might not seem like it.’

‘Looks can be deceiving.’

Xena wondered if he meant to be spiteful, or if he simply was this way. She had yet to hear him speak in any remotely happy tone. At best, he had given off an air of determination.

‘What do you think we will find, up in the north?’

‘I hope to find an answer to my questions, and maybe the reason as to why the skies there are always clouded. Those clouds haven’t changed.’

Upon taking a short look northwards, only darkness met her sight. The clouds would only block the sight of stars. The moon could perhaps have been somewhere among them. Vandheer’s last statement struck a thought in her, however.

‘Have they looked the same, ever since we first saw them?’

‘Only the feeling I get from them changes. Aside from that, it is getting colder.’

‘We have the northern winter ahead of us. Have you ever seen snow?’

‘The Black Mountains are tall enough to bring lethal cold, some years.’

‘Did someone die?’

‘Some almost did. Some were found in the spring, although no one searched for them.’ Xena would have been taken aback if someone else had said it the way Vandheer did.

‘You have the most unpleasant way of speaking, did you know that?’ Kryvis interjected. Vandheer only gave her a blank stare for an answer, looking at the shining gem he was holding in his fist.

‘What is that thing anyway?’

‘An old woman wanted to help me.’

‘Nonetheless, you should change the way you talk. You could make stones feel cold.’

Xena did not know what to expect, but Vandheer still showed no particular reaction towards Kryvis. She had a point in most of her statements, but something about Vandheer made her almost dismiss it. As Leila came back with a kettle of water, Kryvis got up and prepared to sleep for the night. Seeing as Xena had no more questions, Vandheer left her as well and went back to the pond. Leila put the leaves in the kettle and let it warm over the fire, and knelt down as they waited.

‘Leila, do you think he is a cold person?’ she asked quietly.

‘Sometimes, yes.’

‘And the other times, then?’

‘… sometimes I feel like he is staring into my soul, and there is nothing I can do to prevent him from seeing everything.’

Xena had never thought of him that way, but she did see what Leila meant. The young man with his red eyes had a gaze unlike any other. If his speech could make a stone feel cold, then his gaze was certainly sharp enough to drill holes in one. Even if he had a blank expression on his face, his eyes were always unwavering.

Although she preferred doing some things by hand, Xena had a pair of cups among the saddlebags drift along the air towards them. She poured some tea for both of them.

‘And just when do you feel like this?’

‘When he needed to rest in a lightless room, once. Any time I have eye-contact with him, I can’t take my eyes off him until he stops looking at me.’

‘I heard from the High Priestess that his hand turned black once he touched a resonance crystal, and that you lost yourself for a moment.’

Leila didn’t answer at first, as she suddenly looked like she was recalling that memory. With a shudder, she returned to the present.

‘I began seeing his aura. I never imagined that his would have been a cloud of darkness.’

‘A man who is in possession of it, and yet you were unprepared. On the other hand, you’ve never really been outside the Sanctuary, so I can see that you’d likely be surprised either way.