Thirteen

Winter light

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# *Prelude*

Kathryn looked down on the boy’s sleeping face, and back at the thing in her hand.

She was unsure about why she had been given this strange thing. It was most definitely sharp, and it had occurred to her at first glance that whoever made the cover for the arcana crystal was not as sharp in the mind as the crystal was by its edge. The cover did have a blunt edge, but it was an edge nonetheless – it was hardly worth calling round.

The crystal had been glassy while she had travelled to the harbour, and when she continued on land, it had changed colour several times. She still remembered the one time when the colour had become so thick she could not see through the crystal for the rest of the day. Even though she had passed by the Tower of Water at a fair distance, it came as a surprise to her that it was so sensitive.

Now, it was impossible for her to see through the crystal. Kathryn could not tell if it was supposed to be black or dark red now, as it had glowed red when she approached this child, but rapidly faded into a shade, and eventually became black. If she wanted to find out, she would have to light up the room and remove the cover entirely from the crystal.

She opened the door, went out of the child’s bedroom and picked up the candle on the floor next to it. The gem was already fading back to its glassy appearance, but she could have sworn that the redness had been there, in spite of the poor lighting.

*“There’s a boy there. Go find him.” Then what?*

She was sure the arcana crystal had been coloured blood red. The one time she was sent this far away, it was to an orphanage no less – and to top it off, she was *expected* there, and was to work for some time.

Kathryn went to her own little bedroom, and looked out through the would-be balcony. It was quite the spectacle outside – a festival was going on, and it was to mark the uncommon event of the three moons aligning, which happened about once every three decades. The Pebble was the smallest and would, once or twice a year, stand in front of the Rock, unable to hide its larger sibling. The Crystal, in its bright light, stood in front of both, ultimately hiding them. The alignment would remain visible for three whole days, and so would the festival.

Even though she could only hear the festivities further away, lights were lit all over the town and people were bustling about. For whatever reason, this orphanage was on higher ground. She was fortunate to have this view, but on the other hand, it was hard to know just how much the tower had done to get her here. Not only was she expected, but her presence had been made known to the local regent, who had misunderstood the nature of her stay. She suspected the misunderstanding was intentional.

Kathryn wished she could have gone outside, but the thought of looking at the boy with a blood red arcana crystal in her hand popped up in her mind.

*So this is the boy they want.*

She lifted the crystal, and tried to capture the moonlight with it. The little hole on the backside of the cover was not particularly useful after all. The crystal became white, as one would have expected from moonlight – the only problem was that it actually reacted to her own arcana. Soon after she shut off it off, the crystal faded back to colourlessness. Kathryn had no intension of letting her guard down, but it would be easier if there were no one to guard herself against to begin with.

Just before she fell asleep on her bed, the one thing that came to mind was the short moment she had met the boy’s gaze when she first arrived. She had seen silvery hair often enough at the tower, even in middle-aged people, but to see a *boy* with long, silver hair tied together behind his head…

‘Who…?’

Kathryn was about to remove the blanket, but someone prevented her hand from doing just that. She opened her sleepy eyes, only to see something shocking.

It was the silver-haired boy. His black eyes calmly met her stare. Behind him, stood a woman with a quite familiar, nonchalant expression on her face. She had a lot of grey hair now, and the crowfeet by her eyes were now a distinct feature of hers.

‘A good morning to you, Kathryn. Have you met this child?’ the former priestess said.

She looked down on the boy’s little hand, and put her hands on top of his. He looked down on her comparatively large hands, and in what looked to be a moment of awe, stared the black bracelets on her hands.

‘What is your name, boy?’ she asked. It took a while before the boy realized she had asked him a question, upon which he turned his head and stammered his name. He looked at her for only a second before he directed his eyes elsewhere.

‘C-Chrono,’ he whispered.

‘And your family name?’

He moved his mouth for only a second before his expression became frozen in place, as it immediately dawned on Kathryn that the question was entirely inappropriate. She looked towards the priestess, who now wore a familiar, but stern look.

‘Actually, never mind that… but tell me, what do you like to do?’ Kathryn said hurriedly. The boy’s eyes brightened up like the moons in the night sky. To a lesser extent, so did the priestess behind him. As Chrono, in his excitement, mentioned anything that came to his mind, Kathryn exchanged looks with her former instructor, who now seemed to have regained that position, although in a different manner.

‘… and… Lady Kathryn? Can we go to the libraries, please?’ he asked in a sweet, sweet tone. She was surprised to see that the boy was putting in a lot of effort to make a cute and sad expression.

‘Just wait outside, little one, and we will begin there,’ she answered, stroking his long silvery hair as his face beamed in happiness. He ran towards the door immediately, and the sounds of his footsteps could be heard until they faded into a complete silence.

‘Did you grow up with younger siblings?’ the priestess asked, walking towards the balcony. She moved the windows outside and rested her arms on the fence.

‘No, but I was the playmate of an heir. He called me “granny” because of my hair for a while, but when he learned I was merely five years older than him, he wanted to play a lot more,’ Kathryn answered. She had fond memories of those times – her only worry was to be on time to entertain the heir of a mage lord.

‘And before that?’

‘He had me read stories, just like this one wants to. I guess he can’t read.’

‘Incorrect, dear. He can already read,’ the priestess said, as if it was the most unremarkable ability for any orphan stuck on this side of the Old Continent. She continued, ‘But he’s not very interested in children’s stories. He simply wants you to bring him to the libraries of the world and read legends, which is just as well.’

‘What?’

‘Come here, dear. It’s been a while since I last saw you,’ she said. She smiled upon seeing Kathryn dressed in the same clothes as when she was a bit younger.

‘Sometimes, I wonder how many would fight to become your guardian just because of your beauty, Kathryn. And yet, as fate would have it, the Goddess has much in store for you,’ she said, almost as if she was being entertained. It was then that Kathryn remembered that her former instructor had quite a unique sense of humour – she found many things… *amusing*, for the lack of a better word.

‘The boy is gifted, is he not?’

‘Well, this… thing, reacted to him,’ and then Kathryn paused, before continuing. ‘I’m sure it turned red, so I suppose–’

‘Go to the Tower of Water as soon as you can,’ the former priestess said.

‘What?’

‘It’s nearby, and there is no room for mistakes. You might even have to go home first.’

‘Whose orders are these, Validryn? What is the meaning of this?’ Kathryn had rarely addressed any of her mentors or instructors by their names, but all of this was completely unexpected, and beyond common practice. Her former instructor sighed deeply before she looked back towards the rest of the city.

‘I wish I could tell you more, my dear. All I can tell you is that it is ordained by the tower. I do not know who is behind this. Even I thought it was strange – the boy is a mere orphan, at least let him be a child – but I suppose someone knows something we do not. If anything, I would join him in the libraries. Even though you are a sorceress, all is arranged for already.’ Validryn managed to sound much older than she actually looked.

‘I can only pray for the Four Towers’ aid.’

\*

Clyde had little interest in this trip, but it was something that was done as a gesture every few years between the towers. While the ties between the towers had certainly grown weaker, the emphasis was more on the existence of the ties, rather than the strength – in the same manner that having any water at all was a blessing, even if the desert heated it up to the point that he still couldn’t shake off the unnecessary worry that it might just evaporate, despite being bottled.

In the distance, the Tower of Earth reached towards the skies, as if it sought to separate itself from its dry, lifeless surroundings. Clyde would have had that thought, were it not for the duplicates that surrounded the group in ever direction. If not for the mirage, he would still have been delirious enough to see the illusions. He gave in, and picked up the leather bottle once again, taking another mouthful of water. If they had not been riding these strange creatures called camels, Clyde would be very tempted to turn his back on this journey.

‘Do you wind magi have a way of cooling yourselves?’ one of his associates asked. While the group consisted of individuals from all of the Four Towers, Clyde was constantly reminded of how little they truly knew about each other. It had occurred to him multiple times that his lack of interest was probably the exact same thing that allowed the gap between the Four Towers to grow in such a way – he thought little of it still. He was perfectly aware of his guilt in the matter, but it was far from his focus, as he was at least doing something that could only make matters better.

‘That is the case, but I don’t want sand in anybody’s face. Do you have any such method?’ Clyde took another sip before he put the bottle away.

‘Getting used to the heat is about all we do. Many of us make the mistake of getting too comfortable with the warmth however… unfortunately, the winter becomes harsh for some.’ Clyde had so far observed that the fire sage never seemed to sweat – he wondered if the sage had meant something else.

‘I can imagine that. I have always wondered why the Tower of Earth however, would be in such an inconvenient place. Not only is it on the far side of this continent, but it is also a good distance away from the closest town, in addition to being in a bloody desert.’

‘May I remind you that it was built next to an oasis, wind magus? This side of the New Continent – even the sea – is less exposed to whatever mishaps might happen around novices. This continent is generally rougher too, if the maps we have are to be believed. It is the perfect environment for them and the closest one to the others.’

Clyde looked at his fire magus associate. He was a sage, having come all the way from the northern winter lands of the Old Continent. Unlike Clyde, Araenor had grown slightly weary from this long journey, being a senior even among mages. They had travelled far and wide, considering that the journey had started from the Tower of Water, a place that was otherwise foreign to both of them. Even though it was on a sizeable “island”, every single speck of ground was used for something, if not for farming. The concept of gardens was foreign to everyone but the lords and the water mages there.

‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘With a couple of years, young magus, I believe you will know enough to be in the position of answering most questions that come from outside your tower. This is my twelfth or so trip across the ocean, after all. I can’t say I’m as eager as I used to be, but… at this point, my presence is almost taken for granted, with the event.’

‘Surely due to contributions?’

‘Alas, not without a price. At this point, brows would be raised should my absence become reality. For some, the mood would be snuffed out. I hope regular delegates will not become a tradition between the towers, at least not for this long. Even among us magi, weary travel takes its toll, albeit in different ways.’

Clyde figured that the sage had few errands outside of the tower. While this was only his second time coming along, he had considered it a good opportunity to deal with his own matters along the journey. Some of his associates from his own tower showed a bit of interest, but most of the mages were focused on matters that didn’t require more than a bottle of ink, a quill, some paper, and being a resident within the tower.

The journey had brought them across the ocean onto a continent that was said to be a single empire, but it was strange how few people knew that it had dissolved hundreds of years ago. Merchants did travel across the sea, as their goods were certainly unique and easily created a market of their own – and those better off would eventually seek them. Yet, hardly anyone on the Old Continent seemed to know the slightest thing about the New Continent. Young people on the eastern end of the New Continent were often curious, and asked many questions, spreading their knowledge around. Clyde was slightly surprised when he learned that some of his fellow mages knew almost nothing, and cared little for these parts. Common knowledge within the group was only that the New Continent was a place of many countries, exotic lands, very different people, and someone decided to build one of the towers far, far away from the others, in the middle of what should have been a lifeless place. There were few ways to do something so inconvenient, but it had been done, and apparently, there was a good reason – Clyde doubted it was for the purpose of training mages.

‘Distances such as these are also inconvenient,’ Clyde added.

‘Think of it differently, young magus.’

He looked at the aged sage. He had some wrinkles, but his white hair was the only real way to confirm that the man was in fact very old. Perhaps fire did have vigorous traits.

‘How so?’

‘The problem is not the distance, but how we travel. Surely a wind magus such as yourself would be more conscious about swiftness?’

‘I’m sorry tha-’

‘Worry not, young magus. There is nothing to forgive. Some things simply need time.’

The desert’s illusions had dwindled in numbers, but Clyde still had little to no idea of where they were going. He presumed that the mage leading them was from the Tower of Earth, but there was no sign of how he knew the directions. So far, Clyde could only remember that they avoided massive dunes, and apparently spots of quicksand. There had been minor panic – even if the quicksand itself was not particularly dangerous – but the earth mage was attentive enough that he didn’t spend more than a few seconds to stop any dangerous level of sinking for the unfortunate, before they proceeded onwards.

What did surprise him a bit though, was the fact that the earth mage was constantly seeping with arcane power, even if it was only a fraction of a noticeable amount. Clyde himself barely felt anything in the wind each time he tried to sense something. The desert felt very much dead to him, even when they had come across the savannah or the dry wastelands of packed dirt and dust that mingled with the desert here and there.

The sun was well on its way towards the horizon, but the increasing number of plants along the way was enough to make him rather eager. He had been in this desert before, but it was far from a desirable place. If any part of the long journey to the Four Towers could be excluded, the choice was obvious to him. And as if the mirage had given up on trying to lure them, only a single tower remained in sight now, as they finally closed in. The desert sand had transitioned into a healthy savannah as an oasis finally came into sight.

It occurred to him that he should reconsider whether to call it an oasis or not. They were at the outskirts of the town, but he couldn’t remember the oasis being as visible from where they stood now. If it were going to keep growing, the oasis would grow into the size of a lake some years in the future.

Clyde spotted three people coming closer, and sent a minor pulse into the distance. The three were sprinting, and… if he was capable of sensing things well enough in his feverish state still, they were remarkably swift. He stepped off his camel as they slowed down their approach to the town. Eventually all of them had gotten off their steeds, and some of them were wondering what kind of people they were. Clyde had only been here once, so he would need to jog his memory.

It took only moments before they reached them, and upon inspection, the other mages’ knowledge was confirmed. The people here were indeed different – their tanned skin was the most obvious sign, along with very dark brown hair, and their lightweight, bright clothes hung somewhat loose at all parts of their bodies. Somehow, their clothes had powerful colours, ranging from powerful violet to a vibrant hue of orange. The natives wore the same hoods as the mages, which were presumably cover from the terribly hot air and the sun. There was something about their facial traits that made them look almost childish, in his eyes. They were likely young men that had just come of age, but he found it strange how they could look so childlike. The lack of any facial hair was something he couldn’t quite remember from his last visit, where many adults had grown a fair amount. Their hair length varied, but commonly, the men kept it short, just like these three, difference being that these ones had also shaved some of their hair on the side in a pattern he couldn’t quite make out.

The three young men kneeled and held their hands in front of them, one in a fist with the other covering it on the top. They were led by one in the front, who wore a red wristband. The sage held out his hands in the exact same manner.

‘Our chief wishes to extend his greetings, Lord Sage.’

‘I accept it with gratitude, Conël. And I see you’ve grown a lot since last time, lad. Lead the way.’

‘Yes, Lord Sage.’

As they proceeded towards the village up ahead, one of the two other youths went ahead, while the fire sage signalled for the other. Araenor pointed to one of the saddlebags, and the youth pulled out a small, cylindrical object covered in black cloth, before sprinting back to the village. When they finally came to the entrance of the village, the young man named Conël ran ahead. The troupe had finally arrived at their destination, and the other mages dispersed. Clyde waited until he was alone with the sage, who hadn’t moved beyond the village entrance.

‘Are you that familiar with these people?’

‘Indeed I am. They are… naïve, to be frank. They are a warm-hearted people, but perhaps a tad too soft. Fortunately, they live right next to the tower. I have always felt awe when coming home to my own and observing its timeless stature, but… needless to say, the Tower of Earth hardly feels like it belongs to our world, to my old mind. And somehow, they see it daily throughout their lives, and get used to it, just like we’ve become used to our own. Although they do call it the Tower of Sand, as is proper.’

Clyde looked up towards one of the Four Towers. Some would say it was a marvel just in terms of building, but it was more than just that, even in terms of magic.

*Something beyond our world, huh.*

The Tower of Earth was a one-of-a-kind, like all of the other towers. The giant structure was taller than any other, save for the three other towers, or two, depending on how one would measure height. It was unique however, in that it was supposedly able to rearrange itself in all kinds of ways, unlike the one he came from, which was slightly limited. Being a construct made of vast amounts of sand, it was held together in ways that were long forgotten, if not secret. The tower was often enough rearranging parts of itself that stuck out from the actual *tower*, and it could do so at surprising speeds. Like a tree, it had structures that grew from seemingly random places, but there was no certainty how long each branch would remain. These locations, and their connections to the tower itself, could change at any time of the day, or gradually, as did many of them. Right now, one could see three floors that were slowly rotating around the tower itself – on one side, it was dissolving, and on the other, it was building up. One would have to keep track of them carefully to actually see them moving. Some of the structures seemed to fade into the rest of the tower. From the ground, Clyde could see some people walking out on the platforms that seemed to form spontaneously, and moments later, a bird departed from one of them. From the size of it, he would have to guess it was an eagle, or a hawk.

For someone who did not know much about it, the Tower of Earth seemed to be a sand tower that was formed and held up by invisible forces. It was, in reality, a very solid structure wherever one could suspect it to be. Any attempt at testing the surface of it would allow one to push through the sand only a tiny bit. Those platforms that had formed earlier were fading, but that was just the way the tower worked. The tower’s shape was subject to the will of mages, but only to some degree. Its massive number of floors – seventy-two, ignoring possible crypts below the ground – was a constant, and its width was generally the same. The thickness of various parts, especially the walls, could always change, depending on interferences from those that inhabited the tower. One such interference that was quite common was novices eavesdropping on each other by thinning the walls.

Clyde had difficulties remembering how the village looked the last time he came here. He recalled that there were always people around – merchants in the streets offering goods from various faraway places, children playing in alleys, be it tag or pretend fencing with some sticks, and a few tower inhabitants outside every now and then. He felt few changes in the place, and it surprised him that the village was faring well. The near constant commerce that the Tower of Earth enjoyed, was solely because of its status.

‘How do you think people here would fare without the tower?’ Clyde asked the sage.

‘About as well as any grain of sand here, blown away into insignificance and forever lost to memory.’

‘So the tower is everything they have.’

‘Not quite. Should the tower vanish into thin air, their only problem would be how long the water is going to last, and perhaps bandits who get lucky wandering through the desert without having to deal with the illusions that protect this place. As long as the water stays, however, this village will survive. They’ve managed to find ways to survive, though not against violence.’

Even though Clyde was a full-fledged mage, the marvels of arcana were still astounding to him in some senses. Most of the buildings in this village were made of solid stone, and he could hardly spot cracks in them. None of the stones looked naturally formed in any possible manner, and various props looked to be made with civilized life in mind. The shops here looked especially unnatural, obviously formed by earth mages and the like. Many surfaces were visibly smooth, even from a distance, and as they passed by some rather large houses – likely enough for entire bloodlines, considering they even had three floors – Clyde was surprised to see glass windows here and there. Most of the windows only had shutters made of wood or cloth. There was no reason to even attempt to sense cracks in the walls

As they passed by several villagers, a few stares and curious faces were directed towards them. The children were especially wondering what they were – some hid themselves while trying to peek, and others actually went towards the two of them, before getting hauled back by a relative. The mothers often enough apologized, to which Araenor responded mostly with ‘It’s nothing,’ coupled with a smile. Clyde stayed silent, as their gazes did little to affect him. He had seen the eyes of a child who was far more curious than any of those, and in a way, he got spoiled because of it.

*They aren’t like her… their curiosity is fleeting.*

It was… an influential event in his life, if he were to understate it. Clyde vividly remembered various moments from that time, and, perhaps, she was the only child he would ever remember, until he would possibly consider becoming a father himself.

As they reached the end of the road, the sun was inching towards the horizon, tearing open a bleeding wound in the blue sky. The houses became less impressive as they closed in on the Tower of Earth, until a single, striking construction came in sight. It was the only house in the area that was obviously made of something else. Instead of the sand-coloured tone, it was quite dark. It was formed completely like a block with all smooth surfaces, and Clyde couldn’t quite see if there was any opening into it besides the ashen door.

‘Did I ever ask what this house was about?’ Clyde asked.

‘Believe it or not, the soothsayer here has many a time been right about us magi. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was the one who sent the lads our way.’

‘How so?’

‘The people here have no sense of direction at all. They hardly walk out of sight. I suspect they were slaves that were left here, at some point, and somehow they were the descendants of a few lucky ones. Their history and traditions are… rather lacking, for any kind of people. But one could forgive them due to their circumstances.’

‘… One would think that as long as the tower stands, they have nothing to worry about.’

‘That is a striking thought, young magus. Certainly impossible to doubt. But how long can one rely on others? Even if the towers have all lasted a thousand years, who is to say they will last for another thousand?’ Clyde left the question unanswered, as they witnessed the marvel in front of them.

The Tower of Earth, as awe-inspiring and otherworldly as it was, became a majestic sight when standing beneath its enormous height, like its three siblings – or four, depending on one’s opinion of the last one. The shadows that faded away on the ground, the sand that was visibly crawling towards the tower and climbing up its walls, and the streams of sand that fell down from it – the mixed feelings of fear and reverence for the demonstration of power and such craftsmanship, was limited to exceptionally few things in the world. But on this scale, there were only five things that were of another world.

The first part of getting to the Tower of Earth – starting from the Tower of Wind – was a trivial journey on horseback across the Old Continent and to the coastline somewhere, upon which one would take a ship, and, if lacking a wind mage like Clyde himself, hope for good winds and currents. Unfortunately, even then, one would have to skirt an area that was notorious for its terribly unstable conditions, lengthening the trip by a week. The Sea of Silence was named aptly – it would be still waters and little to no wind, until a storm emerged from nowhere, silencing any voices that entered its waters. Even wind and water mages would struggle against nature’s prowess, thus making it an area that all men of the sea knew to fear and avoid.

Following what was otherwise considered smooth sailing across one continent to the other, the New Continent’s maps could be rather inaccurate, but the mages on this side of the ocean were certainly attempting to rectify that situation. Even so, considering where they went ashore, the only map they really needed was the one of this desert – which was arguably the most arduous part of the journey.

The map itself was detailed in strange ways – on the backside of it, there were various explanations for the numerous symbols used on the desert drawing. Clyde had little doubt mages made it, as the map showed reference points that could be used by none other than themselves. If it was to be believed, mana dust was scattered across the desert, and some areas contained enough to project unnatural mirages – Clyde had no way to know if the mana dust was in some way related to the Tower of Earth, serving as some sort of deterrent against unwelcome travellers through the mirage duplicates of the Tower, but it was, beyond a shade of doubt, the single most troubling part about this journey. They had actually seen some bones on their way across the vast fields of sand.

And now, they had finally arrived at the tower’s entrance area – which was, by itself, not too different from the other towers’ entries. The nearby area had various lesser buildings for use, and the oasis had seemingly found a way into the tower through an aqueduct. The tower’s walls were practically seamless, but the frontal part was made of differently coloured types of sand.

The “door” was far from normal – the entryway was sealed off by two round discs of marble, the other hidden behind the first. They were almost as tall as four men stacked on top of each other, although part of the door blocks were under the ground. Clyde still hadn’t quite ascertained how earth mages were taught to move them, but he knew perfectly well that it wasn’t the only way to get past them. Rolling them to the side by force would have been an impressive feat, if it was possible to begin with. Above the frontal disc, arcing in its grandeur, was the Tower of Earth’s insignia – a cloven spire.

The ornaments that decorated the marble disc were moving, and Clyde could already see that they had changed in response to others who had just entered. The centre changed from the Tower of Water’s insignia, to that of the Tower of Fire, and the Tower of Wind. Other troupe members had presumably already entered.

The earth mages were oddly enough sitting on top of large, white pedestals, with their legs crossed. They were covered in some of the loosest clothing Clyde had seen across both continents – the desert garb had a greyed, sand-coloured outer cloak, which would have looked like a piece of rag for most people, on top of a bright, beige robe. The earth mages had already risen from their pedestals and stepped down onto the dusty, hard packed dirt.

Clyde was lost in his own thoughts as the earth mages inspected the scroll Araenor gave them. The ancient belief of fire and water being opposite forces, also made many believe that earth and wind had a similar relationship. Upon looking at the Tower of Earth’s endless shapeshifting, he could not help doubting it altogether. The Tower of Earth reminded him far more of the Tower of Wind than any of the other towers. Even as they were now able to enter, the “contrasts” he had observed thus far did not really strike him as such.

In spite of the entry hall’s size, there was a sense of modesty to it, as the vast hall was mostly empty. Immediately upon entry, visitors were greeted by two statues on top of slightly elevated pedestals. The one on the left was the statue of Arthequina, a mythical woman, known as the Cleaver for having split a nearby mountain – a single giant rock, rather – cleanly in two. She was dressed in garbs befitting of one who wielded both sword and arcana, a practice that had since gone in decline. In her time, however, she had been a leading figure of sorts. On the right was an equally impressive but mythical man who was only remembered by his one feat, the Rift Maker. Legends held that his rage had culminated in a furious outlet of unhindered arcana – the result was quite literally a wound on the world, as the rift was a humongous, and looked like a wound even on vaguely precise maps. It stretched from the northern lands of the Old Continent and almost made it into the ocean. The Abyss was the name of that vast rift. It was appropriately named, as all attempts at reaching the bottom and coming back, no matter how, failed without exception. As if to spite this legend, an equally marvellous bridge connected the separated lands, and was host to a city ruled by guilds. The bridge was also a result of arcana, but it was a collective effort, led by the Tower of Earth.

One of the statues twitched slightly, before turning its head toward Clyde. To see sand move was one thing, but stone statues? He doubted he could get used to such. The last time he had been here, the one on the left was the founder of this tower, rather than some figure of legend.

The most unique sight within the Tower of Earth was the fact that the sand was shifting ever so slightly even on the inside, and water was crawling along the walls in strange manners – sometimes they would form ornamental patterns, if not precise figures such as the seals of each tower, or the shapes of people.

In the middle of the hall, there was a wide stone desk with a man sitting on the other side of it, with a quill in hand and stacks of paper on both ends of the desk. Behind him, a stream of sand and water split clean in the middle was constantly making a little ambient noise. A crescent shaped pond surrounded the middle of the hall, lending a sense of calmness to the visitors as they waited for the person to turn his attention to them. The Writer eventually looked up towards them as he was done with a piece of paper, and carefully selected another from the stack on his right, and inspected it as he took short looks on each of the troupe.

The most significant similarity between any of the towers would be the sheer height of them, followed by a round staircase within. The flagrant display of their respective powers never ceased, and served many purposes. The most important one was to instil a sense of fear into those who would behold the sight of it. The staircase crawled up along the tower’s walls, grand doors standing on top of large steps as entrances to whatever rooms they might hide. As they ascended towards the higher floors of the tower – an effort in itself, and the best way of making mages well capable of travelling – the stairs themselves were helping them in ascending the tower. Like the rest of the tower, the stairs were easily manipulated too.

As strange as it would have otherwise sounded, the Tower of Earth was never the same. The sand that was once at the top might have returned back to the vast desert, and come back again. Or it might have never been anywhere else than up there, since the creation of the tower. The shape of the tower itself was ever changing. Even though its other name – the Tower of Sand – was one used by powerless, it was likely the more appropriate name.

Just before the grand doors on one of the sixtieth floors opened, Clyde wondered if the entire tower might just drift away like sand in the wind – scattered, and never again to form one of the great wonders of the world.

*Snow is still deep… and wind is cold…*

*Getting heavy. That light… what is that? I have to keep going…*

‘Cursed snow…’

*Have to avoid walking under the trees…*

*So… cold… is it warmer there?*

*Cold…*

*Blasted cold!*

‘Did it go away…? Ugh… I remember this… blindness…’ *So much snow. Where am I? Wherever the light is… at least I can remember where it was.*

*I can hardly feel my hands. My toes are going numb.*

*Cold… cold…*

‘How long must I go?’

*My eyes… am I recovering?*

‘The light*…* is that… a tower*?’*

*My legs…* ‘So… tired…’ *So cold…*

*No… can’t…* ‘What is that… is that…?’

# Light

Upon looking up from the tome, the first thing she noticed was the snow blowing far more sideways than usual, to the point she could. The wind was undoubtedly howling outside, Brand thought to herself. The White Wastes rarely had storms brewing, even in the middle of the night, when the weather did get somewhat harsher. It was mostly cloudy and snowing, and sometimes there were memorable days of sunlight in the middle of the winter.

Living in one of the northern-facing quarters, Brand saw the mountains of the White Wastes daily. Sometimes, the difference between the ground and the skies faded, and so the view could sometimes look like a white veil covering the icy cold window. The further north one went, the worse the wilderness became. The usual, and inevitable problem for all who decided to venture deep into the north, was going snow-blind. While the north was indeed cold, summer allowed the snow to melt, occasionally leaving some spots of snow for themselves. But the mere idea of summer was a vague thing if one decided to travel even further north than the Tower of Fire, the northernmost place where people could actually live.

As one travelled beyond the tower, the first obstacle was the sheer size of the snowy fields. Due to the tower’s presence, the layers of snow were much thinner the closer one was to it. There was dirt beneath the snow, but at some point, no record could tell what there was beneath the snow, be it ice or stone. The tower’s constant, vibrant heat caused much of the snow to melt into water, which was eventually led towards the tower, through channels of ice that had been formed long in the past. But at some point, one would be wading deep in the snow. Worse years could have waist deep snow.

Beyond the snow fields, old winter trees from unknown times blocked the view of what lied in the wastes beyond. The trees towered far above the ground, and if the snow ever melted, there would have been a clearing in what would otherwise have been a forest – but the White Wastes were appropriately named. The forest wasn’t quite worthy of any title, as it was hard to make out anything green. Not to mention, most would be snow-blind at the point of reaching the trees.

Further north, the White Veils was the name of the mountain range that was otherwise indistinguishable from the rest of the skies. She couldn’t tell how tall or far they were, and there had never been anything hinting at either. The tower itself surely dwindled under the mountains. Among those who had ventured deep into the White Wastes, only a handful few had come back to describe what the most lifeless place in the world looked like. Many had decided it was not worth it along the way – and for whatever reason, some started doubting their reasons for going in the first place. These same people would also forget *why* they went, but *after* forgetting that they had once been there. Some claimed the White Wastes had a maddening effect, made stronger by the brashness of the fools’ decision to wander into a place where life was unwelcome.

Among the accounts of a mage from centuries in the past, the mage had said he missed hearing the voices of others. He was weary from using arcana constantly to brave through the stinging cold, and many, many times, he too asked himself why he was doing this, and yet he kept going as deep as he could. He had used a note to keep himself going, simply with the message that, when in doubt, he should go forward, until he saw himself in very real danger.

The White Veils had strange arrangements and shapes, if one found a way to these parts. One notable mage, Rodrin of Eulvor, had attempted at melting the snow and ice beneath him, making a staircase of ice descending further and further downwards, but there had never been any end to the ice. He had eventually asked if what they said in the northwest was really true.

*I thought the bloody fools from Raehnor were mad. But can you even call this place an iceberg?*

*Our tower is undoubtedly insignificantly small compared to these gargantuan mountains. Worse still, this awful ice knows no limit. Even with an icy cavern to prevent snow from making my discoveries harder to find, there truly is no end to this ice. While the outer layers of ice remain blue in the light of my flame, the ice below darkens as my flame descends into it. Where there is no light, I dare not travel, and this place does at least have days and nights, even if the sun itself is impossible to distinguish.*

*As for the mountains… they are strange, as if the ice and snow live their own separate lives. I have already encountered what would seem like entire mountains of nothing but snow, packed hard only due to the snow on top, and yet it never turns to ice. I melted holes in these and they just do not stop. At other times, I find mountains and hills that hide an unending mound of ice beneath a thin sheet of snow, and I cannot climb these without melting the ice into fine stairs. I have found cliffs covered in snow that I dare not step close to, for who knows when an avalanche might come? Even worse, places where I cannot tell if I am about to drop off a cliff or walk into a wall of snow.*

*As if a grand magus has been at work, this place has strange… creations. If not in entirety, then in part. I wandered up on a solid mountain, which had proper stairs going up all the way towards a plateau. From there a round, descending staircase of solid ice took over and allowed one to take footsteps on top of what should have just been air, far above the safe ground. It was as if someone had decided to freeze the snow in place as it descended. Like a reclusive grand magus’ terrible joke, the imposing staircase ends in the middle of nothing for no sensible reason and continues onwards a jump’s distance away – it is simply put a walk to one’s own death. The mindboggling part is not that it descends in an impossible manner – after searching for quite some time, the remaining part of the staircase seems to stand on quite literally nothing. I cannot find where it starts.*

At some point during his lifetime, Rodrin of Eulvor had apparently lost all memory of ever going north. All who went to the White Wastes eventually lost memory of going to the White Wastes, if a sudden change of heart did not strike them first.

The ice barrier that blocked much of the north from travel was capable of restoring itself, and those who ventured north did so only by melting the barrier first. Some years later, the Tower of Fire forbade travels beyond the barrier, and Brand knew of no accounts that written after the prohibition.

Brand looked up from the tome again, gazing at the vast field of snow illuminated by the Flame. A powerful red light was shining down on the snowfields. She immediately got up from the chair, tossing the tome aside, and looked towards what should have been a night sky covered by the eternal winter clouds. Instead she saw something she had only read about – the aurora, or veils of light, as those not from the north called them. The red lights danced constantly like a veil blowing in the wind. However, unlike anything she had read about them, she felt a tingling sensation crawling across her body. Was this what arcana felt like? Just as the veils jolted, the tingling stung her in various places across her body.

Suddenly, the light veil shifted its colour to green. The tingling had stopped. She checked her arms, confirming that nothing had happened to her body. Just as she looked back, the veils began to move violently and with no order, turning blue in the process. Inexplicably, arcana became fully visible to her eyes, flowing both outside of the tower and within. She could almost feel the arcana on her skin, the way it flowed about and kept swaying her in different directions. Then it felt like a massive weight was pushing down on her.

She was terrified. Brand found herself dropping to the floor, and crawled towards the window. She had never seen anything like this. Her breathing had stopped completely, and she could barely move. The blue light veils had transformed into something she couldn’t begin to comprehend. They came together, forming a towering whirl of blue light, and an arcane seal above it flashed for a moment before Brand lost consciousness.

Days had passed by since the blue flash in the northern skies. When Brand had first come to, it was because someone else had come to check up on her; she had been knocked out for two days. The daily piece of ice that formed on the other side of the door to her room had not broken, and it was unusual for anyone on this floor to never leave their room. The ice shard had managed to grow unusually long. It was only a novice who had been sent to check on her, but it wasn’t the first time either. Sometimes, she would bring several books from the libraries and spend most of the day by the warm hearth in her room. In spite of its name, the Tower of Fire wasn’t a particularly warm place, which was a bit of an inconvenience to her. Fortunately, she was clothed in two layers of warm, fine wool with a fur coat on the outside.

Ever since the light veil had vanished, the mark on her right forearm had been acting strange. There wasn’t anything special about it initially, but it didn’t stop the day she woke up. The first time it was nothing but a tingling feeling, as if someone was poking a stick on her forearm. In the days that followed, it slowly became worse, until it felt like claws tearing up her skin.

Unlike how her skin should have been torn up and bleeding, the skies of the north that were usually cloudy, were actually wounded. The openings in the sky were scattered, but the greatest of them was a slash that pointed directly south.

It was an eerily straight cut in the clouds.

The ripping feeling came back into her forearm. She dropped the tome she was reading and clutched the mark instantly. She forced herself to stop and looked at it. The pain didn’t stop, but the mark seemed sharper than she could remember. Her skin was slightly red around it. She turned her gaze towards the White Wastes as she clutched her forearm again. What was the cause of this?

The pain stopped immediately when she saw something moving in the distance, beyond the barrier. There was a small figure, but it was definitely moving. It was far, far away, moving through the snow, and it had just gotten past the forest. It took some time before the movement was clear, but any doubt she initially had was already gone. Someone was coming from the White Wastes. But that figure was also slowing down.

Without a moment’s hesitation, she put on the fur coat and her equally wintery boots. She threw the door open and didn’t bother closing it. She sprinted down the long icy staircase – something she would not have done on any kind of ice, unless it was the strange, *dry* ice used in the Tower of Fire.

Brand’s hands were already cold and hurt after touching the ice that sealed off the White Wastes. The ice wall was thick enough that trying to look through it was useless, but it was stronger than it looked like, and reached far above her own height. Fortunately, it was possible to climb above it due to tiny little cracks here and there – even if her fingers were frozen cold by the endeavour.

She could see still the figure in the distance, but she could only make out a human silhouette. The light of the tower was weak at this distance. As she ploughed through the snow, snow kept finding its way into her boots. The light was becoming ever weaker as she kept moving towards the distant person ahead. And as fate would have it, snowfall came to hinder her sight. Powerful gusts of wind made it even harder to see, with the snow on the ground rising and blowing in the wind.

She had read of the Northgales many times, but to think she would be in the middle of one now was beyond belief. Brand could hardly stand on the ground without falling over. She regretted the fact that she had forgotten her gloves even more now, as she could hardly feel anything at the tip of her fingers now. The hood was not feeling too helpful, even if it covered her face.

She didn’t see any way out of this by just moving in the same direction.

‘Where are you?!’ Brand shouted on top of her lungs.

She waited for a response. The only answer she got was the howling winter winds, until she heard something vaguely reminiscent of speech, then followed by a slightly alarming sound. She waited.

Whoever that figure was, it was close, and was no longer moving.

Before Brand could even make a decision, she was running through the snow as well as it allowed her to, still shouting for the one who came from the White Wastes. She stopped to shout once more and hopefully hear some sort of response.

‘Where are you?!’

Only the Northgales answered her call, and the howls were everywhere around her. She would almost have preferred hearing wolves. And it was then that she finally saw the figure, lying down in the snow, and hurried over towards it.

She knelt down and was surprised to see that it was a man, but she couldn’t make out any traits in this darkness. The Flame only gave so much light. His clothes were far from fit for the north – he looked like a sellsword from the southern parts of the continent, given those thin fabrics – and for whatever reason, he had a long scabbard attached to his back. His hood was only good for hiding his face. He wore leather armour on his left shoulder, and armguards on both forearms. His boots were just leather, but there was snow in them.

Brand had difficulties lifting him up, but she eventually got his left arm over her shoulders and managed to get him on his knees. He was still not awake – she proceeded to clap his face until he hopefully gained consciousness.

‘Wake up, wake up! I can’t help you like this!’

The Northgale still howled in her ears.

‘Come on… wake up! You can’t just die here, not after I… not after you’ve come all this way! Don’t give up!’

No response. She kept supporting him, even if she couldn’t move from the spot.

She thought she had noticed some movement from him, but Brand couldn’t be sure with all the snow still blowing in the wind. She had difficulties feeling her hands and feet now.

Without any warning, she felt something touch her right hand. At the same time, she heard breathing that wasn’t her own, and saw vapour that also didn’t come from her mouth. The weight on her shoulders lessened to some extent, and was slightly pushing her to the side.

A strange voice whispered into her ear – it was one of a long gone accent, hazy and weak, as if it was clinging on to life by a thread. It uttered one word.

‘*Go*.’ His cold hand tightened its grip around hers.

The Northgales were many, but sporadic. They had almost covered Brand’s trail in snow, but the path back was simple, and the storm had lost its strength – it was hardly pushing her now. She only needed to look for an everlasting light that no storm could truly blot out from view.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked. The only response she got was his breathing through rattling teeth.

As they came ever closer, the layers of snow became fewer.

‘Can you stand?’ she asked him, when the storm was starting to settle down. The snowfall was eventually reduced to gentle, white spots that one could keep track of with the eye. The light from the tower was well out of eyesight now that they were close to the part of the barrier that she had climbed over – and then it occurred to her.

She had come all this way with hardly any plans. How was she supposed to get them back over it? Or even herself? There was no way she could climb it again without losing her fingers to frostbite.

‘Blasted…’ Brand could hardly contain herself right now. She couldn’t keep it together. She landed on her coat and slumped on the snow. She let the unknown man land in the snow. She did not care anymore about him. She had wandered into the most lifeless place in the world, yet she had wandered into it without any way to get back.

‘Is this how it ends…?’ She doubted the tears would find their way across her face before freezing along their path. The ice barrier stretched too far to both west and east of the Tower of Fire, for sealing off the White Wastes. And now, it sealed her off the rest of the world.

Brand did not notice the stranger getting up on his own feet.

The sound of shattered ice struck her ears. In complete shock, she was staring at three strides of the ice wall having been shattered into thousands of tiny shards. Where they once should have been, the stranger she had just rescued was standing, and his fist remained where the ice wall was naught but a memory. He turned around and looked towards Brand before falling on his knees.

Under the Flame, Brand could see some details on him.

He was undoubtedly around the same age as her. He had a modest figure beneath his tattered, loose clothes, as they hung loosely on his body. His hair reached his shoulders at the very least, and it was terribly bright, in stark contrast to her own. He was unimpressive in terms of physique, and as far as she could tell, he was slightly taller than her. He had a high jawline. He had a straight, modest nose. His chin was sharp. The Flame did not let her see his eye colour, but something about his eyes seemed otherworldly to her.

Besides being handsome, he was clearly from a different part of the world than any that Brand had been to. His clothes were also outlandish. No country that she knew of had an emblem similar to the one on his shirt.

His hood came off when she tried to lift him up again, and he was barely able to keep walking. His white hair fell and covered his jawline on the sides, and his already closed eyes on the front. His skin was close to, and befitting of someone who had just moved to the southernmost part of the Old Continent. He was still breathing, to Brand’s relief.

‘Just hold on…’

The snow here was barely reaching her ankles. It took them only a little amount of time to reach the snow-covered gates of the tower. Once inside, Brand covered the stranger in her cloak and let him sit on it, leaning on one of the two massive ice pillars that, standing on the left and right side of the entry hall about twenty strides from each other, towered high above her. They were hollow and contained relics at various points, encased in a grand structure of ice that was formed to ornaments elsewhere. In spite of the abundant ice that formed the Tower of Flames, the inside was still a shelter from the freezing cold that was the White Wastes.

She was hesitant to believe it at first, but she was hearing footsteps from the staircase’s upper parts. She paid it no heed for the time being.

Brand went towards the desk in the grand, icy entry hall, and picked up something she would have claimed was glass, were it not for the fact that she was in the Tower of Fire. Behind the wide desk and its many stacks of paper, was a simple chair on a platform that extended into a large pool of crystalline, blue water, where light was reflected by the ice that formed the underside of the deep pool. She scooped up some water into the ice glass, hurried back to the stranger whilst preventing any of the cold water from escaping. He was no longer breathing like a weak new-born, and swallowed enough of the cold water for her comfort. His hand was already becoming warmer.

The first thing Brand saw as the footsteps came to a halt shocked her. There was one and only one person in the tower who, due to tower formalities, always wore a large, deep red cloak with a great, black symbol on the back. The scarf around his neck was white, and large enough to cover even his mouth. With a stern look on his face, he looked first at Brand, and turned behind to see the Tower Writer, who, while dressed in far simpler white and red robes that hung loosely across his entire body, gave the exact same impression, the only difference being an obsolete amount of authority, although his baldness and stone-faced expression only diminished that aspect. To the Writer’s left, was a woman dressed in a black and red dress, with a cloak to cover her sides and her back. The dress was decorated with patterns commonly found in tomes of arcana, and while her face was somewhat shaded due to the dim lighting, her bright, fair hair came out on the front. She was only slightly smaller than the one they both stood behind, and held something Brand recognized to be a simple iron staff decorated only by a piece of deep blue ice sculpted into the shape of a fire. The colour was that of Liar’s Ice, and by that, she deduced that the woman was the Watcher.

‘I was wondering who might have gone on a fool’s errand to burden mages with the task of retrieving his own frozen corpse, but it turns out it was something altogether different,’ the deep voice said. The man in the large cloak stepped slowly forward as he continued, ‘… and yet, to see a mere commoner rescue someone from the depths of cold… who are you, child?’ The crescendo as well as the question echoed throughout the entry hall of the Tower of Fire, collapsing only before the climax of him called her a child. In front of Brand, was the very source of the light on its top – and as he was essentially one with it, he was also simply known as the Flame.

‘I… I am–’

The Writer interrupted her with an emotionless voice before she could answer, which was quite befitting of his characteristic, grey westerner eyes. ‘The woman in question is a historian known only as Brand, Master. She claims she is from Stellamor, but, along with being a *powerless* and having foreign traits, she has letters from the White Tower and the Tower of Water, and neither one of said letters specified their motivations. I suggest we handle this situation with the benefit of the doubt, as she has stayed here throughout the summer and has been a quiet guest, which she and the letters expressly mentioned.’

The Flame quietly turned his attention to the woman on his left, the Watcher. She nodded silently. Brand on the other hand was trying to recall the previous time she had talked to a Writer – their ability to remember so much was almost scary.

‘Very well. For breaking the ice barrier, you will be confined to the Tower of Fire for seven days. And for breaking the ice barrier a second time, you will be confined to my chambers until further ado. It is *ordained*,’ he said.

‘It is ordained,’ the two others said in perfect unison. The Writer’s deep, stone cold voice sounded like a perfect opposite to the Watcher’s lighter, calmer voice.

Brand was having trouble believing what was happening. The fact that her captivity had been *ordained* was trivial, compared to being brought to the Flame’s chamber. Some part of her was afraid of things such as interrogation and threats, and another was excited that she would be able to see such an exquisite part of the tower.

Before she could respond, the Watcher was holding her arm, and the Writer was already carrying the foreigner she had just rescued from the White Wastes. They ascended the left staircase, the less tiresome path towards the top of the tower – which was still an arduous process to begin with, as the Tower of Fire one of the few buildings in the world that was reaching for the skies with its many, many floors above the snow.

The unique part about the Tower of Fire was that its two ice pillars ascended whilst being separated in their own parts of the glassy tower, which was reunited momentarily at the middle, and near the top. Each pillar pierced through what was called the Western Tower, and the Eastern Tower, the parts further above being known as the Left Tower and the Right Tower. The pillars were exposed in the open winter air for only a small section before the tower’s halves continued surrounding them. Beneath the tower split, the singular staircase was wide enough to contain the two massive pillars of ice. Many had told about the sighting of a split tower – but hardly anyone could believe the description of a single tower that split into two smaller ones. It was a kind of wonder no one would believe without seeing it with their own eyes.

The first twenty floors were nearly uniform, and the tower as well as the original staircase split up at the fifteenth, where the glassy ice floor gave Brand a clear view of what would have been a hard fall below, if the Tower of Fire was to live up to its name. Each of the early floors were supposedly supporting the pillars, rather than being supported by it, and they were the least decorated ones. These floors were, at most, decorated with ice sculptures that grew to become very specific things, growing on the corridors’ thick, icy walls. They were reserved for the many servants of the tower and those who did paperwork, and various services that each of the Four Towers deemed menial and necessary only for the sake of order. Each of the twenty floors contained residences with fireplaces that would never stop burning. Some specific floors above also had undying fires, but mages were rarely responsible for those. Almost none of the ice walls here were transparent.

The section where the tower split in two, was known as the Divide. From here, until the fortieth floor, the Tower of Fire was split and connected in between the towers by bridges that were exposed to the winter winds of higher elevation. The bridges themselves were split in the middle by a single piece of ice, known as the Shard. It reached the very top of the tower, and it started from the bottom of the tower. According to myths of ages past counting, a *frozen flame* rested in beneath the Shard, waiting to be directed to the Beacon.

The next twenty floors were, from what Brand had gathered during her travels, reserved exclusively for novices of the tower, and these floors’ corridors also had open spaces reserved for ice sculpting, a common hobby among many inhabitants, but mostly by novices of young age. The open areas for ice sculpting were enclosed by transparent ice walls next to the staircases, and as such, sculptures of varying quality were often put on display, finished or not. The most exceptional ice sculptures would be used for future decorations, and in a manner unique to this tower – they were melted into one of the two pillars, and as a result, remain among the many patterns that the ice within the tower would grow and form into. And whoever desired to keep a manifestation of a sculpture long gone, could, if able to, attempt to climb the ice walls with ice hatchets.

Across all of these floors, there were libraries, and the bookshelves were not made of the kind of dry ice that made up nearly the entirety of the tower’s surfaces, but of wood, to discourage any usage of fire arcana – to burn one book meant to burn many. To create fire was mere child’s play. The important ability was *to kill fire*. Fire arcana was easily capable of creating and fuelling fires, but the tome of fire arcana Brand had read contained a large section dedicated to the struggle of extinguishing a fire created by fire arcana, with manipulation of fire arcana itself – and at the end of the chapter, it was revealed that the Tower of Fire was so close to the White Wastes precisely because it was easier for any fire to die out here. The entire tower was purposely infested with Liar’s Ice, a kind of ice that was suited for countering fire arcana. And in the Tower of Fire, it was used to snuff out flames no longer actively controlled.

The earliest accounts of fire arcana being used, often told of accidents. When fire arcana was still considered a falsehood, the uncontrolled usage of it had resulted in many places burning down to ashes, with little to stop the flames’ constantly invigorated heat, as whoever made them was trying to control them. Fire arcana was the last one of the elementals to be tamed by the mages of eons past, and the Tower of Fire was also known by commoners – sometimes called *powerless* by mages – as the Tower of Ice, for that was precisely what it was.

While these floors were reserved for notices, they were mostly asleep at this hour. Not a single door on the ascent to the top was opened.

The fortieth floor, called Teovar’s Twist, was where the tower’s halves crossed each other. It was similar to the entry hall, and unique in having a small balcony that surrounded it. The amount of space was much smaller however, as the two pillars that supported the majority of the structure were now on the outside of the tower itself. Below them, one could make out the torches burning on a bridge connecting the two halves of the tower.

As strange as it sounded, the western tower had one more floor than the eastern.

A certain myth said that a mage who, after the Second War of Arcana, had decided to damage the Tower of Fire in a very long-lasting way, namely by twisting its two halves. The fable was, of course, only partly correct, for the current fortieth floor lacked the ice of the old, eastern tower that once stood at that height. The tower had been twisted and forcefully merged in the middle, and eventually its shape returned to that of two towers that climbed directly towards the sky, rather than in a circular pattern. The tower had been straightened, but had never been the same ever since.

Brand had been on this balcony once, but been pulled back into the tower’s lesser cold after having a terribly freezing air blasted in her face. The balcony extended only two strides from the Cross. Bits of ice had already formed on her nose, and ever since, she had lost all interest in the open air above the ground floor.

The Twist, as it was commonly called by the tower’s residents, was decorated in the most unique way – all the ice in here was as clear as air. This was the only floor that was clean from Liar’s Ice. The walls that were on this floor were those that formed this part of the tower, and that of the staircase. One could see the two, great pillars on the western and eastern side of the tower.

The actual decoration here, however, was a stone statue of the tower itself, as tall as the men of the north. It was rooted in the middle of the floor, and had its own fire perched at the top – apparently it was a model of the tower, but Brand had never found original descriptions of the Tower of Fire involving a twist in the middle. She had concluded long ago that the stone model, being a gift from the Tower of Earth, was rather an object of arcana.

While the ice that formed the Twist was clear, the staircases’ ice was as dense as it could possibly become. The fortieth floor already gave the illusion of walking on air, and the idea of a nearly invisible staircase was intimidating as well as wondrous.

The next eight floors, following the Twist, were dedicated to practice for novices, who would often target ice sculptures that had grown rapidly during a short amount of time. The last two floors contained two, large halls where both full-fledged mages and novices could practice freely, without anyone to look after them. Brand had come sometimes to see if she could recognize spells from the tome of fire arcana, but, without being gifted herself, it was hard to spot any of the interesting spells that she had read about, partly because the descriptions were written for novices to begin with, who would also feel the arcana.

It was a pity, but as a historian, she had more pressing matters than learning spells, even if she wanted to use arcana.

All the towers shared various characteristics – the most common one was an entire floor dedicated to cooking food, or as was the case in the Tower of Fire, preparing it, leaving the heating and cooking up to the mages. The most common dish in the tower was a stew made with beans, some common root plants, and varying amounts of meat, favouring the young. Children in the adolescent age were treated better than most others, in terms of nourishment. It wasn’t often that she saw younger novices, considering that she lived on the fifty-first, but she remembered one who loved to make ice sculptures and eating in between breaks of chipping away the ice.

The mages’ residences were placed high in the tower, and closer to the top than most others. From the fifty-first and up until the sixty-sixth, there was a hierarchy among the mages. Her own room was on the fifty-first, where one commonly found the weakest mages of the tower, but only because it was closer to some of the libraries of her interests.

At the sixtieth floor, the Tower of Fire was once again reunited into a single, large tower, where the two great pillars of ice were in the same space within common walls. The staircase had returned to the larger size found on the floors beneath the Divide, and was only slightly reminiscent of the novices’ floors. Starting from the fifty-fourth floor, every fourth floor among the mages’ section of the tower contained a large archive. Brand had already scoured over those, but as fate would have it, she was not allowed access to the oldest of books and scrolls that were essential for her. Yet, she was allowed to pick up tomes of arcana – probably on the basis that, since she had no ability to wield arcana at all, there was no harm in it.

It didn’t come as a surprise, but fire arcana in particular was difficult to gain control over and had always been, even after it was tamed by the earliest fire mages. According to the tome she had read, fire arcana was the wildest and most unpredictable among the elementals, and thus raw power – the ability to contain and use great amounts of arcana, particularly in bursts – was the most dominant factor, in measuring a mage’s standing among his peers. Even though fire mages were greatly respected by the mages of the other towers for the possession of such a powerful arcana, they were also feared by commoners for the exact same reason.

The fact that they spent much of their time in such a cold, intimidating environment, had the exact same effect.

Brand was panting heavily, and her legs were begging for rest. She had lived in other towers, but her endurance had never been something she needed to worry about. She hardly had needs for going outside of the towers, or to any of the floors above the middle.

The sixty-seventh floor was mostly reserved for whatever lords and envoys might be visiting, for important matters – often during notable events in history. The next two floors were essentially the governing parts of the Tower of Fire. A circle of councilmen among mages lived here – known as *sages* – and made decisions together with the leader.

And then there was the point in which the tower was starting to become narrower, ultimately culminating into the top of the tower, where the Flame resided, and his namesake radiated light and warmth to the surrounding lands.

The seventieth floor was the one in which the sages met with their leader. The staircase spiralled outwards on its way toward this floor, and those who ascended to this floor was greeted only by the largest gate in the entire tower. They spanned five strides to either side, and the ceiling’s height was at least that of six men.

These doors were impossible to look through, and so were the walls. All the ice on this side of the doors glimmered with the characteristic deep, blue light that defined Liar’s Ice. The doors were decorated with naught but one symbol that reminded Brand only of fire – it was a frozen flame, so to speak, and curiously enough, she could not remember seeing it anywhere else within the tower.

After the Watcher let go of Brand, she fell down on her knees the instant they stopped in front of the gates. She could hardly walk anymore. In spite of the tower’s rather cool air, as well as the cold floor, she was drenched in sweat after the monumental effort of climbing the entire Tower of Fire.

The Watcher, staff held in hand, raised it. It was then that Brand recognized something she had seen multiple times during her visit at the Tower of Water – she was using ice arcana to move the grand doors.

The hall past the doors was, undoubtedly, excessively large for its purposes. Near the middle of the room, there was a crescent shaped, black stone table, arching across a fifteen stride long area, the edges of it facing towards the north. The hall itself was something around thirty strides wide, and the ceiling descended towards the middle, where a single, giant crystal was suspended in the air, acting as a chandelier, illuminating the large hall with a weaker version of the pristine, red light that coloured the crystal itself.

On the hall’s far end – the northern end, to be exact – there was a brightly lit doorway, slightly lighting up the path towards a white, crescent-shaped platform that was encased by the walls, surrounding the crescent table almost in entirety. It had additional steps so that one could ascend onto the platform from any given part of the lower ground. In front of the table, up on the platform, there was a throne that could be found in three other places of the world. If the crescent stone table had been round instead, the stage’s stairs would likely have touched it.

This was the first time Brand had actually seen a tower’s throne. She had only read descriptions and seen drawings of it, but to see one of the Black Thrones for herself was an altogether different experience. She even managed to forget about the weariness in her legs.

Before the Second War of Arcana, the four thrones – as well as those sitting on them – were commonly known as the Pillars of the World, and were the seat of each tower’s leader, also known by their ancient title – *Amahn’Evir*. The title had appeared in only a handful few scrolls of history before arcana was mastered to a useful degree, and referred to those reaching for the skies. It had been used to describe overly ambitious people. Some of the ancient languages had terms for the strangest things, but “sky-dweller” was undoubtedly appropriate for someone who spent so much time living on such heights.

Brand was lifted up on her feet by the Watcher, who again held her arm and guided her forward into the hall. Immediately after entering, the Watcher closed the giant doors behind them by the ground with the staff.

‘Chain him to it,’ the Flame said. To some it would have seemed like a strange idea, but Brand knew very well why they were having it done.

As they rounded about the stone table, Brand could see even the finest details on the throne. It was made of a black material found in exceptionally few places in the world, the only outstanding part of it being the tall back, larger than necessary, and no hollow part. The difference was that various symbols and seals, found only in ancient tomes of ages past, were engraved across all of its surface. As they came closer to it, the reddish reflection from the chandelier got brighter. The chandelier’s red light was barely noticeable on the throne itself.

‘Shall I hide him behind the throne, Master?’ the Writer asked. It was hard to see, but Brand could just make out some shapes that would fit the description of chains, with shackles at the end. She watched as the Writer put the stranger’s arms in a cross across his chest, each wrist being bound to a chain on the other side of the throne itself.

It occurred to Brand that this was perhaps the only reason the throne was so large – to physical restrain someone chained behind it. She couldn’t make any sense of why it was that way, or why the stranger was being put in chains immediately behind it.

The Flame walked toward the doorway behind the throne. It led to a staircase, ascending to the seventy-second floor. None of them followed him.

‘You are dismissed,’ he said to the Writer, walking through the bright doorway. The light as well as the ice was that of pure white. He stopped before ascending the steps.

As the footsteps of the Writer faded out, the Flame turned his attention to Brand, eye to eye. The Watcher hid behind the Flame, as if she was but a mere shadow.

‘Come.’

The staircase itself wasn’t particularly remarkable, aside from being smaller than most others in the tower. There was no Liar’s Ice in it, but looking at it reminded her of ambient light that she could only recall seeing in the Tower of Light.

Descriptions of the *Amahr’Evin*’s own chambers were scarce to the point that Brand had never read about them, but this was something she had to remember.

The most significant detail was that the pillars were part of the walls on this floor, and separated the floor into three rooms – one on the west, one on the right, and the largest in the middle. On the far end of the chambers, there was a wide, dark, wooden desk along with a simply cushioned armchair made of wood in front of a large window of crystal clear ice, from which the view pointed south. This was the first room, and there were a few artefacts here that she recognized, such as the viewing sphere that stood in an open area in the very middle of the floor, illuminated by a distinct light that pierced through a circular section of clear ice on the ceiling. The light itself was intense considering it was the middle of the night, and was undoubtedly sufficient in lighting up the whole room, with or without daylight from the window in front of the workplace desk, or the candle chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The source of that light was the Flame himself, as well as his namesake, which was frequently referred to as the *Beacon*. Bookshelves and other kinds of storages stuck out from the walls, and there was only a handful amount of gaps in them. And, notably, the floor here was covered with a rugged, red carpet.

Brand would have loved to take a look at the other rooms, but the doorways were blocked by curtains rather than any doors. The Flame also waved at her to come to towards the window, before walking off to find something in the room. He had already put a simple wooden chair in front of the desk.

‘Sit.’

Without a second thought, she sat down gently on the chair, and looked out through the window. There wasn’t much to see, besides the minor illumination that the Beacon brought upon the falling snow.

As she waited, Brand could only wonder if the stranger was going to wake up sometime. She felt uneasy about the situation, but she could only endure and hope for the best.

‘How long have you studied at the White Tower?’ the Flame’s voice asked. Brand turned around, somewhat surprised by the fact that he uttered that name with incredible indifference, and figured he wasn’t done with his search among all the books and artefacts.

‘After my twelfth year, I was a regular visitor at their libraries. I’ve never stopped reading since,’ she answered. She looked back towards the window after he passed the middle corridor, and over to the other side of the room. Brand could hear him opening various books, and putting them somewhere. ‘I’ve been studying history for a little bit more than ten years now.’

‘And what do you plan to do with all this knowledge?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

The Flame paced back and forth only a few times more until she saw him holding a single, tiny book that could be put into any space worth calling a pocket. He proceeded to sit down on the other side of the desk, and opened the little book. He turned the pages with much precision. If anything, note was more appropriate, as it was hardly larger than her hand.

‘Before I continue, young lady, heed my words – you will leave only when I tell you to. You speak when I ask you a question, until I say we are finished. Is that clear?’

‘Yes.’

She waited patiently as he cautiously turned page after page, inspecting whatever writing was in those little pieces of paper, until he put the little notebook aside.

‘Where are you from, child? You are not of this continent. You are not a sorceress. You are no citizen of Stellamor. If anything, you are foreign to the entire continent.’

Brand twiddled her fingers for a moment while thinking of how she was supposed to answer that question.

‘I… do not know. I am an orphan.’

‘Why were you allowed to study in the White Tower?’

‘I am not sure, my lord. Maybe someone took a liking to me. I spent much of my childhood in there. It is known for its kindness, after all.’

Brand was not particularly comfortable with being forced to answer these questions, but she didn’t want to imagine the horrors of fire inflicted upon flesh. She was also not done yet with the stranger she had rescued from the White Wastes, but she dared not ask anything.

‘What have you studied, during your visits to the Four Towers?’

‘I have not visited the Tower of Earth, my lord.’

‘Those that you have visited, then.’

‘I’ve studied… all kinds of things. Everything from books of history, scrolls and accounts of events and places of the world, tomes of arcana, medicinal recipes, maps of different parts of the world, myths and bedtime stories, legends, ideas of the world…’

Brand’s voice trailed off as the Flame put forth ten large, blank pieces of paper, a bottle of ink, and a quill, on her side of the desk. She only got a short look at him before he spoke again, but it was enough for her to make out all the details.

His straight jawline, outlined by a well-trimmed line of beard, was connected to a rather straight chin, and complemented by high cheekbones, leading to a slightly hollow cheek. His nose was a bit on the high side, but not quite worth noting. He had long, brown hair that fell flat on his head, tied on the back. The Flame’s blue eyes were quite the contrast compared to his attire. His eyes reminded her only slightly of Erythreans, but everything else hinted at him indeed being from the Faraway Kingdom.

‘A map of Stellamor, the characteristics of each of the Four Towers and their arcana, the Fifth Coming as prophesized by the Blind Prophet, a brief description of the Second Dynasty of Hydora, four spells at minimum and one enchantment. Make drawings as you see fit.’

He got up from his seat, and proceeded to go back to the bookshelves. Brand looked at his back before he turned to the side, behind a bookshelf filled to the brim with books and tomes. She stared at the ten papers in utter disbelief at his demand.

‘You have until sunrise.’

\*

When twilight came, Vyce Talgar heard the something falling to the ground. Looking towards the entry to his study, he saw Aryn pushing the curtains to the side, who spoke only two words: ‘She collapsed.’

The girl was lying on the floor, the papers lying scattered around her. He could almost hear her breathing, as the room was completely silent. Not even the winds outside could be heard.

After he had Aryn retrieve a blanket from his own chambers, Vyce picked up the papers before Aryn covered the girl. He did not know how long she had been awake, but her tour outside of the tower along with the climb to the top of the tower was likely enough to exhaust her body. Regardless, it was neither a matter of consideration nor consequence.

The first detail Vyce noticed upon skimming through each page, was the orderliness of the text, and a handwriting befitting writers who made copies – it was almost pleasing to his eye. Not only had she remembered the order of his requests, her drawings were remarkably precise. Each line – both lines of text and straight ones on drawings – was straight as an arrow. Any curve, any circle she had drawn, was near perfection.

However, it almost came as a shock to him just how much she had managed to write down before sunrise.

The pages were filled with indescribable detail. She had clearly attempted to consider the width of various corridors that might be more or less unknown. Various streets and areas were named or specified. The girl had also included a drawing of the White Tower from a distance, and again with remarkable detail. She was skilled at drawing in itself.

The descriptions of each Tower were based on not only their histories. She had obviously spent time on her own wandering around the towers she had been to, but she had also clearly tried to learn about arcana and the usage of it – even if she was a powerless one, and had no affinity for arcana whatsoever. She understood precisely why each tower was where it was – the Tower of Fire’s need for cold was painfully obvious, but the true benefit was close proximity to large deposits of Liar’s Ice.

For whatever reason, it turned out that the White Tower had older, if not more, copies of ancient texts. While it was known that the Fifth Coming was the second one to be told by two prophets, it was also the only one in which a prophet had died *during visions*, rather than of natural causes.

Vyce had trouble believing this, but going by the White Tower’s history – at least that which he knew of– it was, at best, something to keep in mind. At worst, it was a lie used to cover for whatever they deemed to be in need of protection.

The Second Dynasty was dubbed in irony, as the ones that followed were all cut short, hardly ever lasting a year. Following the death of a near powerless ruler, power-hungry individuals reached for the throne in a bloody battle in which many other countries were involved, one way or another. For each army that took the capital of Hydora, another one came to siege it in rapid succession, and rather successfully. Betrayals were numerous and resulted in a time of tension even between the countries that only wished to extend their influence into Hydora. The country that was once used as a battleground for others, still had scars from that time. Hydorans were known to be distrusting towards strangers.

If anything, what he had seen up until now, was simply signs of a talented historian with a vast memory, fine writing and exquisite drawing skills. However, he had never imagined she would go to such lengths to study arcana, as a powerless. She had obviously studied tomes substantially, but to think she would memorize such spells, as well as those of ancient arcana that nobody could possibly dream of using…

Yet, in light of the recent events, he had other, more pressing worries.

‘Aryn, try to wake up our visitor.’

\*

The first thing that Brand heard when she woke up, was the sound of footsteps and a closed door. She inexplicably found herself back in her room, albeit with a slight headache. The chair she used to sit on, next to the window, was now right next to the bed instead with a small letter, with a note attached to it with a needle.

*Your departure has been prepared. Do not open this until the you leave the tower.*

Brand remained on the bed for some time, trying to comprehend the situation. Trying to remember what had happened, there was nothing beyond the moment she started becoming sleepy, and a few seconds of closing her eyes. Before that, she had spent the rest of the night writing and drawing ceaselessly on the papers.

She couldn’t make sense of why it was demanded of her, but then again, few things about the situation did. There was also no way for the sender of the letter to know when she opened it – in a tower full of arcana especially.

The letter contained an even smaller note.

Pain shot up her right arm, and she uncovered her forearm. Her skin had become red around the mark. Somewhere in her mind, she had a growing suspicion that blood might just start seeping through the mark if the pain came back, but the thought faded with the pain. For a second she wondered if it might have been caused by opening the letter instead, but it was unlikely.

She looked back at the note, and her eyes widened as she echoed the words in her mind. The note almost fell out of her grasp.

*The stranger broke his chains.*

Brand had difficulties understanding what had just happened, but this was unbelievable. The stranger had escaped. He had gotten loose from one of the Black Thrones, even when he had actually *shattered* the ice barrier. He must have used arcana. Brand herself had absolutely no abilities involving arcana, not even the ability to sense it, but there was no way he could have destroyed the barrier without it. The ice barrier was a wall made not just with any sort of ice – many, many mages from the Tower of Water had come to the north, when the Tower of Fire was built. Their purpose was not just to construct the tower, but also a wall to wide and large that it would hopefully prevent anyone from going past it. The only means of getting past by force would have to be powerful fire arcana. In extraordinary cases, a powerful user of ice or earth arcana could shatter it. Besides arcana, one could only try to climb cracks.

The problem was that one could not break the chains with arcana. The thrones of the Four Towers shut off all abilities to use or sense arcana. They even made all arcana completely invisible and soundless, to whoever was in contact to the throne, all in exchange for one benefit – arcana could not affect anyone touching the throne. The Black Thrones were the ultimate impenetrable prisons for wielders of arcana, and at the same time, the ultimate shield against them. To have a mage sit on them willingly was a far more symbolic act than any, but to be put in shackles by the chains on the backside that all of them had, and then break free?

Brand could not fathom how he had escaped – breaking the chains by brute force was just as impossible as using arcana to break free. But the more pressing issue was that he *had* escaped. She would not have someone like that stranger escape from her after what she had gone through in order to save him from the White Wastes. This series of events was all too special for her to ignore.

The mark on her forearm had inflicted massive pain to her, and knocked her out during an aurora unlike anything she had ever read about. One of the most interesting parts of the north, to her, was the aurora, but she could not possibly have imagined it would end up the way it did. Not once had she read anything about it becoming blue, or such chaotic movements by the curtains of light – and such a massive fluctuation of arcana, to the point that even she felt it.

And then the man whom she had rescued. One who had emerged from the place beneath the aurora, from the White Wastes itself. He had already collapsed repeatedly, and yet he was somehow capable of breaking the ice barrier. He escaped out of the ultimate prison for mages, or any user of arcana – a black throne.

The one thing that was undoubtedly true, no matter what happened, was that there could be no contradictions. Never in history had there been recorded a single incident of a mage escaping the black thrones when chained. Either the throne sealed all arcana and the man did not use any, or the throne did *not* seal all arcana, and he used one that its seal could not affect. But it defied everything she otherwise knew about arcana, and forces beyond the grasp of powerless ones. She had read everything that was known about them in the Tower of Light. If the Black Thrones truly had weaknesses, no leader among the *Amahn’Evir* would want such a secret recorded – that is, if they knew about it. And by now, one of them must have.

Aside from the fact that she was no longer welcome at the Tower of Fire, her gut told her only one thing – she had to find him.

# Arcana

There were few roads connecting the Tower of Fire to the rest of the world. Being the northernmost place on most maps, all roads immediately led south. The closest place of significance was another of the Four Towers, namely the Tower of Wind.

When arcana was still not under complete control, those who sought to dominate it realized that, if their arcana was one that could express itself in the nearby environment, then it would. Water was always the most docile kind of arcana, and earth came after, only because fire and wind expressed themselves far easier than either two – and in much more dangerous ways. Arcana was never limited to just those four, which the Tower of Light was evidence of, but they were the ones most abundantly found among the few who could use arcana at all.

The Tower of Fire was in the North for one reason only – to let flames die out, if the one creating them could not smother them. Liar’s Ice was naturally part of that solution.

The Tower of Wind was close to mountains and steep cliffs for many different reasons, one of them being a sizeable mountain pass north to it, which acted as a shortcut towards the regions in northeast. Whenever winds blew south, the mountain pass would be fraught with powerful, concentrated wind. The ability to calm and direct winds here was an old measure of a mage’s handling of wind arcana. A challenge of olden times was to dominate the winds at the tallest peak, to the point that one could read a tome of arcana without having a single page turned by the wind, or even slightly lifted. Brand had long figured that it was a display of fine control rather than a measure of meaningful capabilities, but the challenge had become one of the many phrases common to the world of arcana. “To read in the wind”, was the exact phrase. To control wind to such a degree was not impossible, but it was a rather hopeless endeavour, and certainly a waste of time and effort.

In spite of being close to a mountain range, that was the least memorable thing about the Tower of Wind. The most remarkable was that the strangest thing on the Old Continent lied there as well – the Moonshard, the upper half of a mountain that was floating seamlessly in the air.

Fortunately, Brand had travelled this way by horseback, and the stranger she had rescued would only have one direction to go without being afraid of getting lost again. All the roads leading to the Tower of Fire first met at a town south to it – Woodwell, where lanterns dotted the streets and lit the night perpetually. The town was named so because its pits – often mistaken for large wells – were used for keeping wood dry during the cold part of the year, rather than keeping water in them.

The snow covered the road and surrounding the field well enough, but timber poles dotted the road along the way to guide those who might lose their sense of direction, even though it was hard to miss Woodwell as it was one straight line from the Tower of Fire to it.

As time passed by, a minor snowfall came. The mare was accustomed to the cold, hard packed snow, but it was also quite familiar with the road, as Brand had been given permission to borrow one by the Tower of Wind. She would not have minded walking from Woodwell to the Tower of Fire, even if it would require her to walk from dawn to sunset. She had already walked several distances on foot, but none of it had left her ready to climb the stairs of an entire tower. When given the chance however, she would still prefer a horse, especially if she could see heavy clouds in the sky above.

There was little to see on the road down south. Smaller forests might be dotting the west and right of the path for all Brand knew, but the snow dressed everything in white – even the horizon could be hard to make out.

By the time she could see details on the various buildings of Woodwell, the sun was already closing in on the horizon. She had also grown quite hungry on her way, considering she had not eaten anything since rescuing the stranger – and as if the mere thought had put him there, she could see someone standing still in the main road, close to the town’s fringe. She kicked the horse lightly on the sides.

“Hey!”

She could already see him turning around.

When she could finally see his face, Brand pulled the horse’s reins and climbed off the horse as soon as she passed the first building, and ran towards him. Before she could say anything, he took a defensive stance, as if he was afraid of her. He was still clothed in the light armour of his. Beneath it, he wore a sky blue shirt. His thin, white pants were perhaps some of the worst clothes to wear in the north. He should at least have had a scarf like her, but if he could go as far as he had in the White Wastes, then this would likely be little more than a simple trip to him.

She was looking for black shackles on his arms and legs, but he seemed to have broken completely free from them.

‘*Sakhi rei keo*?’ he shouted towards her.

Brand stopped immediately, and before she could make a proper sound, she stopped herself with her mouth open. Brand was almost shocked to hear him speak – she had not heard his voice before – but to hear him speak in one of the ancient languages of the Old Continent caught her completely by surprise. Only mages used those languages, and even then, it was mostly for learning. He sounded like he was around her age, give or take a handful.

Moreover, he spoke it as if it was his mother tongue. One of the few things Brand had not studied extensively was the ancient languages – or the dead ones, as some would call them.

‘Um, please wait, I…’ Brand was sure she could find something of use in the tome she had brought along on her journey. She went back to the horse and came back with it, and removed the tome from one of the saddlebags. She tried to find a page with a large amount of ancient language.

While the ancient languages were hardly spoken in this age, there were words among them that referred to things from the past, especially ways of manipulating arcana. The tome itself was hardly old, as it contained a list of terms that originated from the old languages. At some point, the “Old Tongue” became the name for all of them, as the differences faded into obscurity, simply because they were all dead languages anyway.

Sunset was closing in, but there was enough light to read the tome. Brand showed him the page she wanted him to read. He was hesitant, and gave her a suspicious look before he eventually held the tome in his own hands. She had no idea what his reaction would be – for all she knew, he was a foreigner from a part of the world where the ancient languages had survived.

He eventually handed the tome back to her, his eyes wide open. He stared off into nowhere for a while, looking back and forth between Brand and towards the centre of Woodwell, before he eventually locked his gaze on her. He was obviously worried.

‘*Genni keo ri’sei sazelaen?’*

Brand shook her head. She could not understand a word he said. What she did understand, however, was when he pointed towards himself, her, and then towards Woodwell’s namesake, still with a look of distress.

‘Follow me, then,’ she said. Even if he had not needed help from her, she would still try to keep him close by. It was still strange, but some part of her was excited to meet someone who did not speak the same tongue.

Woodwell was essentially a small town nurtured by the merchants going back and forth between the Tower of Fire and the rest of the continent. Gifted with numerous fire mages, it was rather well off despite being so far north. Most of the buildings were old and made with stones in order to avoid fires. Ancient spells of fire and earth arcana were in place here, allowing crops to grow throughout the better half of the year – albeit with less taste, according to some.

The streets were somewhat wide, even though there was hardly any snow here. Few people walked outside on the streets in the middle of winter, even if the warmth was unusual for this time of the year. Unlike the Tower of Fire, where the cold reached wherever it could, Woodwell was a place kept dry and sufficiently warm throughout most of the year – but its people still had a fondness for fires and warmth, stew being something of a specialty here.

Upon finding a barn – which had a handful of horses available for purchase, which the stable boy offered for purchase – she considered the possibility of having to buy another one. She could just take a slow journey, as there was nothing in particular she was looking to do in any particular place, but the longer bits of the road could be tiresome. Returning to Stellamor was a bit tempting.

‘… *enrai sa’sen tahr…*’

Brand looked back at him, and only got a quick glance at his face before he looked away with a surprised look on his face. Was he talking to himself? Even if he was, there was no way for her to tell. Brand paid it no further heed and kept leading them further into the town.

*Dancing Flame*, the name of the largest building in Woodwell, was also the only inn that Woodwell could offer, and it was where she had borrowed the mare. Brand found the wooden poles on the side of the inn and tied the horse’s reins to one of them before leading the foreigner into the inn. Before she could return the mare she would have to speak with the innkeeper, and more importantly, get something to eat.

Upon opening the door, the smell of food – most likely stew, as it was the middle of winter – promptly filled her lungs. The inn usually had a couple of guests in the saloon, but Brand could only see two other men in the room. The stairs to the second floor were on the far end of the saloon. Behind a wide counter on the left side was the owner of the inn, Andreus, whose muscular stature from all his years of chopping wood was often in full view through short sleeves and a tightly fitting shirt. As it turned out, he was far younger than his hair made him look, with a surprising memory for guests.

‘Ah, the young lady from the south!’ The innkeeper beamed at the sight of her, but his expression immediately turned to astonishment when he saw whom she had brought with her. Brand was not interested in answering any questions about her company – for the time being, she had no wish to draw attention to herself, and especially a white-haired man. She put a coin on the counter before replying to his remark.

‘Two beds for the night and a good amount of stew please, Andreus.’ Brand could feel her stomach aching for food. She took a moment to see if the foreigner looked any less stressed now – which he did, fortunately.

‘I see you are hungry then. Find yourselves a table,’ he said, before exiting through a door behind the counter.

Brand met the foreigner’s gaze, and nodded towards a table in the corner of the saloon. She put down the tome on the table, and thought to herself what she could do about this. He spoke an Old Tongue in a way she had never heard before. If she could make him read some ancient text aloud, she could be completely sure of it.

Just as she was about to open the tome again, the innkeeper came back with two large bowls of stew and two spoons. Brand was still determined to avoid any questions. She plucked out a gold coin from a bag inside of her backpack, and held it towards the innkeeper.

‘Thank you, Andreus. I will have to buy the horse, since we’re going south,’ she said. She usually avoided sounding dismissive, but this was one of those times. Eyebrows slightly raised, he picked up the gold coin without a moment’s hesitation. It was far more than she needed to pay him for, but she had no reason to stay in the north any longer than she needed to. He would be able to buy a better one with that coin, especially because of its indentation.

‘Ah, thank you. Enjoy the warmth, my lady. I shall put some water in your room.’ Brand waited until he was out of sight, and put the book aside on the table. She looked at the foreigner. His eyes were more blue than anything she could remember, and that white hair of his only emphasized that, while being remarkable by itself. His skin was hardly pale compared to his hair. His gaze was powerful, as if it forced her to keep looking back at him whenever she took her eyes off him.

Brand pointed at the bowl in front of him, and picked up the spoon in her own bowl.

‘Eat.’ He promptly picked up his own spoon. He was right-handed.

They ate in silence for some time. Usually, Brand would have appreciated the food very much after this kind of hunger, but everything about the foreigner took her attention completely. The only thing she could tell from the way he ate was that he was not a commoner of any kind – he ate with a certain of poise.

When they finished, she pushed the bowls to the other side of the table, and put down the tome between them. Their eyes met yet again and she pointed at herself.

‘Brand.’ Then she pointed at him. In a heartbeat, she saw a kind of fear she had never seen before. He looked as if he had seen the world end in the blink of an eye.

‘*Sahki rei keo? Saref reai va’rhaen*?!*’*

Brand could remember the first sentence he said, but there was only one word she understood, and that was *va’rhaen* – meaning *the world*, and she had read it in the tome she had carried with her. Brand had never tried to learn any of the ancient languages, but she could recognize a few of them, and knew about how old they were.

Before he said anything else, she held his arm in one hand and put a finger in front of her mouth. Brand had no idea how to calm him down, but the only thing she could try was to have him read some of the translations in the tome. She could not understand what he tried to say, but she needed him to understand her intentions.

Finding the earliest possible occurrence of an ancient language, Brand pointed at the part of the page that used her own, and read a single sentence from it. She then pointed at the section where an old language was used, and gave him a look. He shook his head. He was still a bit disturbed.

Brand kept turning over the pages slowly, so that he could look on each page for something familiar to him, and he stopped her suddenly when she came across a page with drawings of arcana – the page was a copy drawn directly from tomes far older than her own. As if it was his very own tongue, he pronounced sentences unlike any language that she knew of. The very sounds he used were different. Even from how the words were written, she would not have guessed how they truly sounded, but she could already tell that he was getting slightly more comfortable.

As she kept turning the pages one by one, he stopped her multiple times, each time quietly reading the words he understood. Brand was having difficulties keeping track of all the languages he understood – just halfway through the tome, she was certain that he knew at least three different languages, perhaps five. To make things worse, he looked like he barely remembered the words himself, and yet he could read them aloud in such a distinct way, each one with a clear difference.

She tried to teach him counting, and he did seem to figure out what she was trying to do after she had counted her fingers. He then counted his own fingers in a language different from all the others he had spoken so far. He counted his fingers in three more languages, and at the fourth one he struggled remembering some.

Brand was already realizing the difficulty of how she was supposed to teach him the language of this world, and foreigner or not, there was no way he would make it here without knowing the New Tongue. If she was to unravel the mystery of how he appeared from the White Wastes and shattered the chains of a Black Throne, she had to make him speak a language she understood, and she would likely have to learn his, to some degree.

As the evening passed, she managed to teach him a few simple words – far from enough to make a sentence, but it was a start. He had spoken words in his own language, which she assumed was a translation to his own, but even if Brand managed to learn one of the dead languages, it would be of little use.

Brand closed the tome and got up from the table. She pointed in the direction of the stairs, expecting him to follow her – instead, he walked towards the door, waving at her to come. As the door closed behind him, a chill breeze rushed into the warmth of the inn.

*What could he be thinking?*

Once outside, the cold wind almost made her forget that she had just eaten warm food. She found the foreigner looking up towards the night sky, and walked towards him. He gave her one look, and pointed up. She looked up, and the only visible thing was the Crystal, partly hidden by clouds. She pointed towards it, and he shook his head. Brand then pointed in various directions elsewhere in the sky, until he gave a nod.

‘Sky.’

He looked around a bit, and seemed to have found comfort in some way, and then, he pointed at himself. Brand knew now what he was going to say, and found herself surprised and comforted at the same time.

*So, we both have strange names then.*

As the sun dawned on the world yet again, Brand wiped tears of sleepiness off her eyes. She had decided to sleep on the less comfortable bed of the two in the room, with most of her clothes on. Sky had obviously not slept properly since when she rescued him, and she was too tired to bother with undressing. The first thing that came to mind was how she was supposed to keep teaching him the New Tongue. She had little choice in the matter if she wanted to know more about him.

The one comfort she had for the journey was that he slept quietly. Brand always had difficulties sleeping in the same room as others who even made the slightest sound, but it would seemingly not become a problem.

Brand sat down on the bedside and found Sky sitting next to the window, looking outside, with one hand to cover his eyes from the sunlight. His white hair was strange, and as he turned around, she could see even clearer that his looks were truly from another world altogether. She had not seen his looks in clear daylight up until now, but he was truly a remarkable sight. She did not find him particularly handsome, but she suspected it was because his traits were just so strange to her. She had never seen anyone like him.

He turned around to face her with a blank expression, and pointed towards a distant direction while still covering his eyes from the sharp sunlight. Brand knew she had to start teaching him how to speak in sentences as soon as possible.

‘Sun… that is the sun,’ she said slowly.

‘Hmm.’

He turned back to face the outside. It was most definitely dawn, but Brand still felt sleepy. She lay down on the bed again.

‘*Brand?*’

‘What is it?’

She heard the sound of him poking at the window, and got up on her own feet to check whatever was on the other side of it. There was a crowd of people on the outside of the inn, and just as she stepped back from it, she started hearing shouts from outside of their room.

‘… what kind of witch…’

‘Since when did you hide them?!’

‘… and I thought you…’

Brand immediately looked around the room for anything important she might have to pack with her. She had no idea what was going on, but Sky quickly picked up on the noise downstairs. He hadn’t lost his wits to the White Wastes, at least. There wasn’t much to carry, but he put one bag over his back and another one in his left hand.

Before she could react to the sound of footsteps on the stairs, she noticed that he had put on his light armour back on as if it was mere clothing to him. He was clearly familiar with it.

Following a short scream, she heard banging on the door. Brand had no idea what to do, until Sky shouted her name repeatedly to catch her attention. She turned around, and saw his worried expression only for a moment before he grabbed her arm and ran towards the window. It all happened so fast, and then, as if time slowed down, something dawned on her.

As they fell along with the shattered glass, Brand remembered that she was no longer welcome at the Tower of Fire, and Woodwell was more or less part of it, but this was plain wrong.

They landed on hard, solid ground, and Brand fell on top of Sky. She wanted to check if he was injured, but he was already up on his feet and pulling her up with him, as if they had only jumped over a fence. He looked only once before turning his attention to the men who were storming back down the inn’s stairs, after having seen them get up on their feet.

‘*Where? Saref naer?*’

She had showed him a map before they went to sleep, while she tried to teach him a bit more about the world, and had figured out that *saref* meant *where*. Whatever the latter word was, she did not know, but if he could already remember words the day after she taught them to him, he probably remembered the four directions too. He even tried to speak with the words in the exact same way as her.

Already, Brand could hear the sound of metal. She knew that northerners disliked both foreigners and mages from the other towers, but this was worse than any misunderstanding. Most likely, one of the men in the saloon yesterday had told people about him, and how suspect she had seemed to be with a white-haired man who talked nonsense in a quiet corner. Whether this was out of fear or some sort of hatred, she could not tell.

Brand took hold of Sky’s hand and started running towards the barn she had left her horse at. She feared these men would not listen to reason, and there were few places to rest that were close enough to Woodwell.

The townspeople were staring as they ran by them. Children especially pointed at Sky and were amazed by his pure, white hair – in stark contrast to the men and women who showed fear and hurried them away when they noticed Sky. She could already hear people calling her a black witch, a darkling, cursing her to oblivion. Brand paid them no heed and kept running for dear life. They were being hunted by men who resorted to threats and violence all too quickly.

Just when the barn was in sight – the stable boy there was terrified at the sight of them and dashed away – Sky tapped her on the shoulder. She noticed the mob behind them already closing in, soon ready to surround them.

‘*Where, Brand?*’

‘South. We go south.’

‘*You, go south*.’

Brand stared at him in disbelief. He gave her the one bag he had managed to bring with him – he had let go of the other one at some point during the chase.

‘*Go!’*

The barn had a stable and some horses tied to wooden columns on the outside. She hurried towards her horse and went to untie its reins, and just as she had feared, Sky was walking towards the townsmen. Brand didn’t know what to think, only what to do, and she knew she had to flee south, regardless of what Sky intended to do.

Then, Brand started hearing shouts and screams of pain – not just once, but many times.

The townsmen were armed with both knives and axes. Some of them had swords. Many of them were of muscular stature, and yet, what she saw was beyond anything she had imagined.

One after the other, Sky was dodging strikes – not even blocking them with his armguards – and fighting back at a speed beyond their control. He did not even take their weapons. He was dodging blades and strikes while surrounded from multiple sides, and somehow managed to stop them from coming any closer to her. He beat them down with both arms and legs, but the speed of it was beyond measure. Brand was shocked still where she stood. He was fighting multiple men all on his own without problems.

It was only when he was about to strike that Brand noticed another man had snuck up behind Sky. It was the stable boy.

‘Behind you!’

Like a lightning bolt, his fist appeared to come into existence where the stable boy had been. Sky had just blocked a long dagger that had been intended to pierce his back, with the armguard on his right arm.

The stable boy flew away several strides, and the others that Sky had beaten down were quick to fall to another strike while they were trying to recover from his blows. A crowd eventually came to surround them, and the men hunting them turned their backs and went through the crowd, which was standing a fair distance away from both Sky and Brand.

Whatever they were saying, Brand wasn’t listening to it, nor would she be able to discern anything but fear and rage among the shouting towards them. If Sky was that capable of protecting them, she might as well get another horse for him as well. Besides, she had paid for more than just two fine horses with the gold coin she handed over to the innkeeper.

Brand had never had the idea of stealing something large, much less a horse, and especially not in a blatantly obvious fashion. Among the remaining horses that were tied, she picked a dark, brown horse that seemed to be a stallion. Its black mane had been recently cut, and it showed a bit of impatience even as she guided it away from the barn. It had a white diamond patch on its forehead. She led it towards her horse and called Sky’s name, who had just beaten down more men, and most recently a woman who was limping back to the crowd, which was distancing itself even further from Sky.

He turned his attention completely to the horse when she came closer to him with horses in tow. She gave him the reins to the stallion, climbed onto her mare, and as if the stallion was carefully considering him to be worthy or not, it suddenly stood up on its hind legs, neighing loudly and almost pulling with it.

‘*Qaenir terena!’* he shouted, pulling the reins toward him, and as if he had commanded the stallion in a language it knew, it immediately calmed down without a single sound. Without a moment’s hesitation or even a hint of effort, he put his foot on the stirrup and immediately took his place on the seat, reins already in hand. He kicked the stallions’ sides, and it immediately dashed towards the crowd. Brand followed suit with her own mare, which figured quickly that it was supposed to follow the stallion ahead of it. The crowd scattered, in fear of being run over by the galloping horses.

Brand did not understand what was going on. All she knew was that they had to ride out of Woodwell, and then south. Sky had already managed to get them onto the southern road, and Woodwell’s fringe was well in sight. There were few people out in the open here, and those who were quickly realized they had to get out of the way.