

“Cirilia?!”

Malakai tore through the crowded streets of Bosaros like a wild bull, running over anyone who wouldn't get out of his path. It didn't matter to him if they were adults or children, buyers or sellers, commoners or nobles, or even the law enforcement. None of them mattered. Only one thing in this world mattered to Malakai: his lost younger sister. He had only noticed she was missing a few minutes prior, but in a city this large, during the Great Bosaros Market, it was easy to be parted with something important. By now, she could be anywhere.

On his way towards the Main Plaza, Malakai knocked over another Covenant mage. The mage called out for him to stop, but his orders fell on deaf ears. It wasn't the first one he had done that to, and Malakai figured it wouldn't be the last. Sure enough, by the time he reached the Main Plaza, he was met by a detail of three Covenant mages.

“Stop right there, sir! You are under arrest for multiple counts of disturbing the peace and destruction of property!” said the captain of the outfit, standing at the tip of a V formation. “Surrender peacefully, and noth-”

Malakai let out a deep growl as his pitch-black pupils bled a hazy white over the rest of his eyes. His long, black hair began hovering off his shoulders as he began emanating a vile green aura. He let out a guttural scream and charged the captain, with each footfall killing the nearby flora on contact. Malakai threw his body at the captain. The aura rotted the skin and flesh of the pure mage right before impact. When Malakai made contact, the captain's torso exploded, coating the mages behind him in rotted flesh and blood. The death mage rolled through his dive and grabbed the leg of the Covenant member standing to the former captain's right. He gator-rolled the leg, tearing it off at the knee with a series of sickening tears and cracks. The former owner fell to the ground in agony. Malakai rotted off the flesh at the top of the limb to

expose the now broken tips of the tibia and fibula, which he plunged into the stomach of the grounded mage. Malakai turned towards the last Covenant mage who, upon seeing the carnage and being coated in his superior's gore, decided to turn and run away.

The white haze that covered Malakai's eyes slowly seeped back into his pupils. He began scanning his surroundings, seeing that a crowd of concerned Market goers had formed around him. As he searched the crowd for someone who could help him find Cirilia, Malakai's gaze met that of a fire mage who stepped forward from the group.

"Holy, hell! When didya learn that?" said Dante as he approached. "I didn't know ya had that in ya! Coulda used that a couple weeks ago back in Highwall."

Malakai's face twitched as he tried to hold back his anger. "I don't have time for this, Dante," he growled. "Have you seen Cirilia?"

"Whatdya mean?" Dante asked. "She said she was with ya. I thought yo-"

Malakai grabbed the fire mage by his collar and pulled him in, nose to nose. The haze began coating his eyes again. "You saw her? Where?!"

Dante tried to be calm, but his eyes and tone betrayed him. "Easy, easy! I saw 'er over by Maude's! I asked what she was doin' there, and she said she was with ya! Ya don't make yourself seen often, so I didn't think anythin' of it!"

Maude's Tavern was a place Malakai went to once and never again. He went in hoping to find some information on an artifact he was hunting for a job, but came out with only deep cuts and a black eye. No one who ever went there came out unscathed, and some never came out at all.

Malakai let out a scream of frustration. “How could you leave her there?!” He threw Dante to the ground and bolted towards the south side of town. Dante picked himself up and followed a step behind.

After the incident in the Main Plaza, no one got in their way. They quickly reached Maude’s and, upon reaching the tavern, were greeted by the smell of burnt flesh. The scent emanated from the alleyway to the left of the entrance, which is where the two began their search. Malakai desperately called out for Cirilia, but got no reply. However, he soon heard a faint whimper next to the building, buried under a pile of garbage and scraps. He called Dante over to help him clear the debris.

They found Cirilia beneath the pile of refuse, curled up against the wall. Her long, sky-blue dress was sliced to pieces by daggers, leaving jagged slashes on the skin beneath. The exposed flesh was covered in burns and bruises. The back of her dress was open, revealing nasty lacerations in the form of crude angel wings. Her blonde hair was stained a crimson red and covered much of her face. Under where her mouth was positioned sat multiple broken teeth in a pool of deep red blood.

Malakai dropped down to his knees beside his sister. “Cirilia? Can you hear me? Cirilia?!”

Cirilia slightly lifted her head towards the voice but couldn’t keep it elevated. Her head fell back down to the concrete below as she winced in pain. Tears began to well up in Malakai’s eyes as he tried to find a way to comfort her, to assure her he was there, but he couldn’t find a place on her shoulder to rest his hand. He carefully moved the hair from Cirilia’s face, to at least look her in the eyes so she could see his regret.

The hair covered a deep cut down her right cheek, stemming from just above the mouth to somewhere further back near her temple. The cut was deep; while Malakai was known to deal with the dead and all the injuries they sustained, seeing the cut be deep enough to expose his sister's skull gave him a complete shock. He yanked his hand back, fearing any more contact could make it worse, yet something seemed to beckon him to push the hair back further. He slowly did, moving it far enough back to rest behind her ear, and found the last of the assault.

Her ear, which was long and pointed before, was cut down significantly. The cuts were crude and jagged, as if made during a struggle, and done with the intention of making them look "human." Malakai recoiled backwards at the sight, repeating curses as he rose to his feet. They didn't just assault her, Malakai thought, they *humiliated* her, took from her what made her elegant, what made her an environmental mage. They stole from her what made her Cirilia.

The distress in Malakai slowly morphed into anger, and then further into outright frenzy. His eyes became hazy white again as he let loose a scream laced in hatred and grief. He wanted them dead, anyone and everyone involved in this. He would make sure they would never live another peaceful day, so long as he had them. He would strip them of what made them special, over and over again, until they knew what they did. They would know that Death had a name, and its name was Malakai.

Dante, who was kneeling beside Cirilia's feet, stood up quickly and grabbed Malakai by the shoulders. "Malakai! Snap outta it! Malakai!"

The death mage went to grab Dante's arms, but stopped himself short. He balled his hands into fists and dug his nails into his palms so deep that he drew blood. His manic breathing began to steady as his eyes slowly returned to their normal state. He took a deep breath as tears began streaming down his face again. He looked the fire mage in the eyes.

“I know ya wanna take care of those that did this, but you gotta stick with me,” said Dante. “We gotta get ‘er to safety first. I know someone around here who can help with the injuries. I’ll get ‘em, and you stay here.”

Malakai nodded solemnly as Dante released him and bolted down the alleyway and back into the street. He collapsed down next to Cirilia, who hadn’t moved since he stood up.

“Cirilia,” Malakai choked on his tears, “I’m so sorry, Cirilia. I failed as your protector, and I failed as your brother. I’m...”

Cirilia weakly placed her hand on her brother’s knee. “K...Kai. It...’s n...not your... f...fault.” Her breaths grew sharper with every word.

“It is,” Malakai responded. “I’m supposed to look after you. I’m supposed to protect you. I failed at both.”

Cirilia tried to answer, but began coughing up blood and phlegm. Malakai wanted to do something for her, anything to ease the pain she was going through, but decided against it. He had already let her get hurt once. He was not going to make it worse.

Malakai wiped his tears away with his sleeve. “Dante should be back shortly with help. We’ll get you better, Cirilia. I promise.”

“I... kn...ow you w...will.” Cirilia started coughing again. “I... st...still l...love y...you, brother.”

She lost consciousness as Dante returned with an environmental mage. The doctor reassured both Malakai and Dante that she was still alive and breathing, though he had no idea how. They took her to the environmental mage’s clinic without issue, and the doctor immediately began working on Cirilia’s injuries. For two days straight, Malakai sat beside his sister’s bed. He did not sleep, nor did he leave her side. Dante made runs through Bosaros to make sure the

doctor had everything he needed, and that Malakai would eat something. On the dawn of the third day, Malakai and Dante had a visitor. It was Commander Olave, the head of the local Covenant force. He addressed the death mage directly.

“You were not the easiest to find. We’ve been looking for you since the incident in the plaza three days ago. I would be here with other officers to apprehend you, but an outside influence has demanded we absolve you of the two murders you committed. They have... appropriately compensated us for the loss of our two mages and have assured us the punishment you will face will be harsher than we could give you. They also asked us to deliver the following message:

*“We have received the news about what happened in Bosaros. We are sending a trusted emissary to overlook the recovery of dear Cirilia and ensure her safe return home. We cannot afford for her to fall into harm’s way again due to an act of carelessness from someone we should not have trusted to oversee her. You will also return with them, and your impudence towards your sister will be addressed appropriately. We expect to receive word of your departure as soon as Cirilia is fully ready for travel.*

“They said you should know who sent the message, and who is coming to escort you.” Commander Olave flashed a sinister grin as he turned to leave. “Safe travels.”

Malakai knew who made that summons, and what awaited him when he returned home. He looked to Dante, hoping he’d have something, anything, to say to ease the tension that now hovered over the room. But for the first time since they met, Dante sat in stunned silence.