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Prologue

Rebirth

The dimming summer afternoon sun streaked through the glass-stained windows of the silver brick lined room. Tapestries with the design of Arten's grand seal—two crossed swords with the maw of a mighty dragon enclosing around them, as if attempting to eat them—were carefully placed along the walls. Suits of metal armor were placed directly underneath each, holding long swords with their hands crossed atop the pommel. A long, velvet, red carpet with yellow-blue diamond patterns strewn down made its way from the archway entry of the room to a rather unusual sight for this time of day at the other end.

A man around his thirties, dressed in a mostly black cloaked outfit sat at an elegantly carved wood desk. It was quite the spectacle with its lingering swirling and popping designs. Atop it was a candlestick adorned in an iron holster with a curved loop protruding the side, a sharply feathered quill, some parchment, and another brilliantly designed piece—a steel inkwell. He grasped onto his feather quill from beside the parchment set before him. His face hardened, showing the scar cutting from the top right of his temple which silently faded away past his eye. This man was not sure what to do, but finally spoke up, "So you seek an audience with the King?"

"Aye. That I do," said the man across from him. He scratched his beard stubble. He had some slightly bulging muscles, but it was apparent he wasn't one to fight. "Things haven't got much better in the last few months. It is the main chatter of the town." The man stubbed his thumb into his chest, raising an eyebrow, "Dunno why they elected me to do this, though."

"I see. What exactly is the issue, though? I, as the King's second in command know of his dealings, but I assure you—"

The cloaked man was interrupted when a fist slammed on the desk, rumbling the items set before him, "Forgive my rudeness, but it's the damned taxes. They've gotten worse since my family moved here two years ago. We all had a meetin' the other day going over this."

It was a tough situation. The taxes weren't the best plan that the King had done to these people. Hell, he had done worse before. His eyes narrowed to a gentle close, "You are forgiven," he put the quill down gently and propped his arms up by his elbows, folding his hands together. "The King certainly has the best interest for those in the kingdom. I sympathize highly with everyone dealing with this..."

he broke off, trying to gather his thoughts, finally coming to terms with the best way to put it, "...issue. Of course, I will admit this isn't the first time I myself have even questioned the King's actions, but I dare not repeat myself from before."

His visitor drew back, rubbing the underside of his fist where it made the impact. He made a slight grumble, though more in an agreeance type of tone. "In any case, that was all that I really wanted to bring up. It's hard on my family and the others—"

There was an interruption in the voice as the cloaked one unfolded his hands from their entanglement and gave a brief wave. A gentle pulse ran through the air and his eyes shone a tad brighter, revealing the rather unnatural color of orange irises. "Don't worry so much. Everything will be fine, as I'll make mention of it to the King when I have the opportune moment. He is unavailable currently." Once he finished speaking, his irises returned to a normal blue hue. The man before him, as he could tell, was unnaturally calm now. He looked over his shoulder towards one of the windows which now had filtered through the moonlight. The stars were hard to make out in the mystifying distortion. He quickly turned back to the man across from him and snapped his fingers, igniting the candlestick on the desk, "I believe it's time that you leave. It's getting rather late. May I take your name for the formal request to the King?"

The entranced visitor blinked twice, almost confused or snapping out of a trance. The candlelight flickered off his cheeks for a silent few moments before coming to realization of the question. "Kert" he said pointedly, reaching out his hand.

He extended his own, firmly grasping Kert's, "Arwel." He watched as Kert stood up and thanked Arwel for his time and walked out of the room. Arwel sat in silence for the next few minutes, contemplating what to do. He tossed that worry aside when he realized that his research was dire, that he had to get back to the restricted section of the castle library. Arwel stood up briefly, grunting as he did. Magic took a decent deal of his energy, or at least on humans, but hopefully he'd not have to use too much more of it. He grasped the candlestick holder on the desk with his index and middle finger and disappeared down the dark archway.

The route to the castle library was a long one; The torches lining the walls illuminated the way forward: down two staircases, and across several long hallways until finally he reached the door. It was heavy with an iron bar across the bottom half of it, mostly for decoration and a golden ring for a handle, though it felt fragile. Every time Arwel grabbed onto it, the damn thing had the

impression of being ripped off the door. The door slowly opened and echoed loud *creaks* in the empty corridor. He was grateful that most of the guard were elsewhere, although they would pay him no mind even if they had seen him down here in the restricted section. He was, after all, second in command, no? Arwel made his way inside and let the door behind him close. The room was massive. Bookcases stood upright with countless books at a height of at least twenty feet. They were all spaced apart evenly, and several tables were placed around the wood floor. The restricted section was merely to his right. It was gated and the metallic entry door had an embedded lock, preventing entry; though it wasn't all that hard for him to get into, he didn't need the key for this. Arwel simply stuck his forefinger into the keyhole and a surge of electricity ran through his finger, exhaling a plume of blue particle into the innards of the security. The door before him made a loud metallic sound and he stepped through the now open door.

He made his way through the towering shelves until he found one with a table perched right in front of it. With a wave of his hand, the outline of several objects shimmered and deformed until they popped back into view. Arwel grimaced at the fact that he was able to pull this off. Months ago, he was powerless, had to ask for the key to get in here without arousing suspicion. Though that wasn't the biggest threat. He had to hide the books he was reading, though he felt certain that nobody checked when he was done for the night. The guard here didn't care all that much, he thought. That night he found a book about magic and what it could do—the possibilities! He had snuck the book out of the restricted section, read it in his off time at the castle in secrecy and after weeks of practicing—he managed to pull off the most basic of spells. He continued to practice, pulling advances left and right. His stamina improved as well. The thought of being able to do what was right drove him, as now the power to overthrow the King was there... or was it? Eventually there was a title that caught his eye in the references section of the book. It mentioned dragons, their history, and their untapped potentials. Now he'd been studying that book in the restricted section, writing down notes on parchment.

Arwel opened the tome before him and settled the candlestick beside him on the table. This current chapter he was reading mentioned a map of sorts. The dried wax-like paper to his right contained layout of the immediate region in the Kingdom. Arwel read the odd descriptions and wrote them down hastily and his obsession grew as he read deeper into the lore. His eyes were wide with fascination. The candle beside him slowly melted away as time

passed him by. He scribbled down notes with the quill that rested on the desk, first having it drink the ink from the well placed before him.

He yawned briefly: having read three chapters was taking a toll on him, yet he remained resilient. Arwel looked to the candle on his table. Its wax body had melted a significant amount, at least half of what already remained, since he sat down. Finally, he turned the page, and it began to point out gravesites of dragons. It even marked the location of one! He smiled and chuckled to himself, amused with his finding.

Suddenly the entry door let out a long, eerie noise. Arwel instantly recognized that it was being opened. He began to panic: who could possibly be here? At this hour? He shrugged it off. *There's nothing to worry about.* He marked down the location of one of these graves which was luckily in a forest nearby. *These draconic legends are amazing. If I could control a single dragon, I could only imagine how much better I could take care of these citizens than that oaf of a king we have.* Arwel closed the book and scoffed, *that should do it for now.* Arwel squinted towards the window, the full moon being nearly obfuscated by the incoming clouds. He stood up slowly, grabbed the map he marked with the gravesite, folding it into his cloak pocket, and snuffed out the candle before casting the concealing spell back onto what he had on the table. It all phased out of existence, invisible to both sight and touch once more. He finally had all the pieces to the puzzle and would do what was right for the people at last.

Once he had made his way out of the restricted section, he locked the door back up. The footsteps from before grew in audibility. He had to do something before he would be noticed. Arwel casually walked to one of the bookshelves that was several feet away. Out of reach and just out of sight of the restricted area of the library. He made a slight grabbing gesture towards one of the books that were high up from him, the air waving gently towards it. The dusty novel was touched by it and slid from position, gently coming down towards its target. Arwel caught it in front of him and opened to a random page. The sound of boots came closer within earshot and he began to scan the page in front of him.

A slightly taller person dressed in steel armor and a mighty sword sheathed to the suit's belt fixed their attention on Arwel. Confused, they spoke up, "Sir?" they creaked, almost intimidated.

"Hm... Ah yes, sorry," Arwel lifted his posture from the book, giving a cheerful look. "What brings you here, Captain Reina?"

Captain Reina took note that he had a look of genuinely curiosity, though it did give off some weird sense. Yet she couldn't tell what it was. She shuffled in her armor, relaxing her tense muscles, "Just doing rounds. Kind of pissed off, given the library shan't need any kind of guarding." She gave a slight chuckle, "What am I going to find anyways? A mouse?"

Arwel laughed with her, it was amusing to say the least. His laughing came to a near abrupt stop when Captain Reina pointed out the restricted section behind him and to the left. She wasn't asking anything specific, but to kind of ease his own anxiety he asked, "What's so restricted about it anyways? Seems like a boring section of the library."

"Hah. I wish it were true," she retorted. "But it's not that simple. All I've been told is that it's nothing *bad*, just old knowledge that should stay hidden, though for reference purposes if needed. You need special permission to go in though." Captain Reina then shrugged, "Sorry for disrupting your... study session here. I'll leave you be."

Arwel gleefully waved her off and once she was out of sight, exhaled. *That almost seemed too close. I must move quickly.* He tossed the book back up and a current of magic placed it back into its empty spot. He waited for two minutes to ensure that Captain Reina wasn't going to come back, or if she did, that it wasn't too suspicious. He made his way to the entry door and once out, it slammed rather loudly when he was almost out of the hall.

The cool night air was like a blessing to Arwel as he walked swiftly through the town. The tall buildings, at least compared to him, were such a terrible precedent he thought. The King had decided at least five years ago they would slowly rebuild each house to fit a standard of living. They looked horrible, inconvenient. Then two years ago he decided to drive taxes up so that the "kingdom could flourish once more after the reconstruction project" as he claimed. *Foolish. The King is just greedy and completely childish.* Arwel growled to himself, but then reached into his cloak, pulling out the map he marked. The distance between the town and this forest was going to take him a while to cover, at least three hours. The sun was going to be up in five. Thankfully, he cast a rather taxing, but necessary time waning spell. Everything around him moved exceptionally slow, though nobody was out. This also meant he moved much quicker and wasn't visible or noticeable from the outside world. Arwel just wished that his plans hadn't been delayed by the meeting with the Captain and several others he ran into on his

way out. They all questioned what he was doing awake so late. The moon above him when he left nearly read as though it were one in the morning. Arwel hurried his pace across the cobblestone-lain street. While time had slowed and he could make it easily, he was easily driven by his obsession to get to his destination.

An hour and a half passed, and he finally made it to the far outskirts away from the town. The walls of the capitol stood mighty, yet distant in a much-shrunk state. Arwel felt a bit more drained as he dropped the time spell he placed. There was one worry on his mind, though. Before him lay a small home, one that he wouldn't even have recognized as existing if he had not ventured out. The lantern lights weren't lit on the inside, so he was able assure himself that they wouldn't notice him. He took a few minutes to catch his stamina. He'd need it relatively soon.

Once Arwel recovered, he made his way into the looming forest on his left. Its entryway was so inviting, yet eerie. The branches were gnarled and formed an arch. Wasn't natural, he thought, though did these people who lived nearby do this, or...? He shook the thought from his mind. The trees above him shadowed him completely from the outside world, almost eating him alive from all visibility. He walked a few paces further in before his right foot was caught snug on something. Arwel half-panicked and struggled to free himself, *god damned thing!* He cursed multiple times until finally drawing back the foot. He squinted in the darkness, still unable to see properly. Arwel pointed his index finger upward and twirled it in a circle rapidly, the air deforming and bright rings protruded from the center point. A small, yet vivid sphere popped into existence and it illuminated the surrounding area. Behind him was still nothing but darkness, as was the path ahead. He looked down and saw a small tree root, cursing at it silently while stepping over it.

The walk felt like it was taking forever and Arwel could feel his legs start to ache with each step forth. Almost as though the forest had known of his intentions and his presence, it came open to a wide clearing. He checked his surroundings, as everything happening seemed way too surreal. Arwel lifted his cloak and pulled out the map he had scribbled on, unfolding it before him. *Yes. This is the place.* A raindrop plopped onto the parchment, followed by several more. Arwel shot his eyes skyward: clouds had begun to drift in and condense together and he held out his hand. There was no doubt about it either since he felt more droplets smack his hand with a soft *plat*. He chuckled to himself, *perhaps God knows what I'm here for-*. Thunder roared overhead like a mighty lion; lightning snaked across the sky shortly after. The wind picked up, blowing the map

from his other hand and up into the sky. His cloak fluttered about. Arwel drew his attention back to the clearing in front of him. There in front of him lay a small headstone, though not like the ones created for the deceased in the town. It was made of marble stone, and almost formed a chair-like shape, but not for sitting on. The taller portion of it had a crude sketch carved into it along with a few gems protruding the corners. He moved forward to get a better gander at it. A creature—it looked like it swirled about attempting to bite its own tail. The horns on its head made it a bit more apparent with the wings on its back. The bottom right section had what he believed to be some ancient writing, a name perhaps? The lower half was a very acutely angled triangle. More runic writing that he couldn't decipher. Arwel began to tear up at the sight of his accomplishment. All he had to do was follow a map, sure. Though when did it get here? He didn't notice its existence when he first came through the clearing. Thunder rumbled once more and lighting scurried, dancing across the night sky. The rain began to pick up, as it was time for him to make his move.

Arwel placed his right hand over the tombstone. The weather turned ever more violent, and his adrenaline was pumping. He pulled out a tiny knife from his belt which had been concealed purposefully and unsheathed it. *Only a few have had opportunities like this one. Even fewer have lived through the process.* Arwel laughed maniacally. He was finally going to be able to do what he believed was right for the kingdom. Overthrow that good-for-nothing King and return order. Make everyone's life better. Arwel grasped onto the handle of his knife and quickly slashed between his index and thumb. It was a rather gaping wound, his blood pooling up immediately. The knife dropped to the ground as he winced in pain, hoping to ignore it enough to make it. The blood droplets smacked the marble grave and Arwel watched as the rain came to a downpour, drenching him. His vision began to blur, but not from blood loss. The runes scratched into the tomb beside him began to glow, "Hear me, mighty Creature that lived long ago in ancient times: I have gathered the requirements of thy rebirth for the Common Era to fulfill my needs. I summon you!" he shouted over the thunder. Several lightning bolts smacked the earth, kicking up massive amounts of dirt. The gems on the grave began to shimmer brightly and Arwel could feel the presence of another being in slumber. Using the last remaining bit of his strength, he laughed louder than ever. He stumbled backwards in amazement; the ritual was complete. One last bolt of lightning came striking down in fury, directly on the grave. It shattered into a dozen pieces as Arwel was

covered in a magical barrier. His strength was fully restored now, and his laughter slowed down. The same menacing presence from before presented itself, pushing against his mind as if linking the two of them together in thought. The last thing that Arwel heard was the roar of a mighty dragon.

One

Nightmare

The sky was a bright blue as the partly cloud-covered sun glistened in the morning. The remaining raindrops on the tree leaves reflected the dreary state of the nearby house. It was a two-story stone-built house. Its wooden roof, covered with straw, was now covered with small tree limbs. Its crops consisted of carrots, peppers, and potatoes that were once blooming, had now been squished, or even uprooted. A raindrop had finally reached the end of the leaf and fell, splashing itself on the damp grass.

Harsh light from outside poured into the dim room. It was rather small yet relaxing at the same time. Near the back of it was a large bed and on either side was a nightstand, matching the bed's brown frame. Against the table to right lay a sheathed sword, its leather shoulder strap hanging loose. The front of the room was fitted with a desk with its own accompanying chair that sat next to the stairs. Upon the desk was a candle holder. It had seen better days, as was noticeable by the warping iron. On the wall behind the desk was a shelf lined with books, although the last two had fallen over on their sides.

Esmund jolted awake, sitting upright immediately. He locked his palms beneath him and into the bed, softly digging his fingers into the sharp hay-filled bedding below. He was sweating profusely, screamed loudly, and then began panting heavily. His head pounding, Esmund tried to slow his breathing, but this proved to be more difficult than he expected. *W-what the hell was that—was it real?* He darted his eyes towards the bedroom window and winced, *of course, it did storm last night*, he sighed while staring at the decimated crops below. He ruffled his brown hair in disbelief, *the dream and the storm were a coincidence, I'm sure of it.* Esmund paused, dropped his arms to the bed, and waited in silence for a moment before hearing his sister running up the stairs.

"Esmund! You alright?" she shouted from below. Her hand grasped onto corner of the stairway and she propped herself up into the room. The dark brown hair that drooped around her head was in a mess and she was still in her pajamas. She pursed her lips and held her hand to her mouth, unsure of what was going on, "Esmund?" she poked.

The boy looked at her blankly before coming to a somber expression, "I—I'm fine. Sorry for worrying you, Serena."

Serena grabbed onto the railing tightly, unsure whether her brother was telling the truth. She dropped her shoulders to allow herself to recover from the panic. “Well, you know how I worry about you, Esmund. Be sure to get up in a few minutes, breakfast is almost ready.”

“What’s for breakfast?” Esmund asked, rubbing his eyes to remove any remaining sleepiness.

“It’s a secret, of course!” Serena said jokingly, giving a small chuckle, “But seriously, spiced oats. One of your favorites.”

Esmund couldn’t help but laugh with her, she could always manage to cheer him up, even when it seemed impossible. “Alright then, I’ll be down in a few, promise.” He grinned slightly, still amused at her joke, and watched as she nodded and went back downstairs.

Once she had disappeared, Esmund tossed the wool blanket covering him aside. He sat at the edge of the bed and stretched his limbs before standing upright. He went over to his set of clothes by the window and could feel the warmth of the morning on his feet with each step. Esmund picked up his folded silk shirt and sturdy brown pants, quickly changing from his pajamas to normal clothes. He then swiped up the sword by the arm strap and slung it over his shoulder and headed down the stairs.

The kitchen area was a quiet place as Serena stirred the morning meal’s dangling metal pot over the firepit. She reminded herself how Esmund had been asking her to teach him to cook, but she never got around to it. *One of these days, I really should teach him. I can’t have him rely on me forever,* she thought, *although at least I’ve been able to teach him about hunting, farming and foraging. We’ll need it today.* Serena quickly grabbed a small pot of cinnamon off the spices shelf hanging to her left. She opened it, grabbed a handful, and slowly spread it out and into the oat mixture. It sizzled to life and the smell was heavenly—the same recipe their father used to make for the family. She clamped the lid shut and replaced the spice container on the rack. Serena then stirred the pot for a good minute or so before she heard Esmund making his way through the entryway. “Ah good, I was just finishing up. Hope you’re hungry!” She beamed a smile at her brother, trying to cheer him up again. He didn’t budge and she let it go, instead grabbing two bowls from the cabinet on her right and pouring breakfast into each. Serena carried one bowl at a time, carefully placing the first on the table in front of Esmund, who was placing his sword down against the table, and gave him a spoon. She sat down with her dish and propped her elbows up on the

table, her head floating above her interlocked hands. Serena felt rather fidgety but couldn't quite make out what the cause of it was.

Esmund sat quietly and tried to bring his mood up, but he was shaking in the back of his mind, unable to deal with the horrible nightmare he dreamt of. *Of course, it wasn't much—but it felt so real, like I was the one who was there. That roar was—*

"Esmund?" Serena inquired, pointing her spoon at him. She stared at him in disbelief as he stirred the bowl of oats slowly. Her brother's face gave off no emotion.

--I could feel it... the rain pelting my body, the explosions of thunder...

Esmund was lost in thought, trailing off about what he saw and at this point his oats had gotten cold. Suddenly, there was a loud bang emitting from the opposite end of the table, shaking his bowl and causing the contents inside to jump out briefly. He slowly came back to reality, hearing a muffled noise as his vision began to focus. His sister was shouting his name from across the table, her expression drawing fury and disgust. His eyes widened. Realizing that Serena had been trying to speak to him, although he was ignoring her to try and make sense of the nightmare.

"I know something's wrong; you can't hide it from me, Esmund!" Serena shouted, her voice a bit coarse and trying to contain herself. An awkward silence followed for the next few seconds.

"I'm sorry, Serena," Esmund muttered, "I'm fine, honestly. I'm just overthinking this horrible dream from last night."

Serena tilted her head to the side and crossed her arms, "I'm sorry for getting upset. You know that I don't like when that happens, and I worry about you all the time—" She let out a somber sigh, "—ever since mom divorced our father... and then when he passed away..." Her voice drifted off as the weight of those words lingered in the air.

Esmund scooped up some oats onto his spoon, unsure how to respond. He looked out the kitchen window and carefully observed the crops. Everything had been ruined and it was going to be hard to replant all that they lost this late into the springtime. He swallowed a mouthful of breakfast, "I noticed this morning when I got up that the crops have been ruined." It was a quick attempt at changing the subject, although it seemed to have worked.

"Mhm," Serena nodded in agreement, "I figured that it was going to at least rain, but not this badly. Seems like there was a horribly violent storm." She stretched her arms for a moment

before giving a reply, yawning in the process, “I think we’ll have to make up for it through some hunting, perhaps foraging as well.”

Once Esmund had finished eating, the two of them stood and began to clean up. Serena handed Esmund the dirty bowls and utensils and he in turn cleaned them in a small washing pan. After several minutes of scrubbing, Esmund dried his hands on a wool towel while Serena went to change and grab her weapon. When she returned, she carried a rather decorative hunting bow that had intricate symbols and creatures carved into; strapped to her back was a quiver containing arrows that she had crafted several weeks ago. On her waist hung a small bag made of buckskin. Esmund grabbed his sword from against the table and put the arm strap over his left shoulder. He and Serena stood side by side at the inside entrance as he recalled when their parents had each given them their weapons. Esmund got the sword from their father, and Serena her bow from their mother. It was all they had left of them.

Serena opened the front door, and a refreshing breeze ran through the room. The trees in front of them swayed gently as if dancing and the sun was high and bright in the sky. The duo walked onward onto the dirt path that led to the crops only for them to deviate and pass them without a second thought. Each step brought them closer to the woodland beside their home. They weren’t even halfway across the landscape before Serena realized she couldn’t hear Esmund’s footsteps anymore. She paused and slowly turned around, unsure of what was going on. Esmund was frozen in place, trembling ever so slightly that it was barely noticeable. He realized she noticed him standing there idly, though, because he quickly ran to get back in pace with her.

The entrance to the forest was tightly packed with trees and barely any sunlight was poking through. It made it hard for the two of them to navigate their way into their usual hunting area deep in the forest. Serena almost tripped on some tree roots at one point, stumbling over herself and grabbing onto a sturdy tree limb before she could fall. Esmund felt chills running through his body as he looked around at the gnarled branches surrounding them. Something in their vicinity felt off, but he couldn’t quite point out what it was.

It felt like an eternity to walk through the odd tunnel-like pathway. Esmund couldn’t wait for this to be over with.

“We’re finally here!” Serena said confidently, stepping forward with her arms raised. The area before the two was a large open space. The trees were more spaced out than those at the entrance, but it felt like one could easily get lost in here and never return.

“This shouldn’t take too long, I hope,” Serena said, drawing her bow from her back, “We’ll meet up here again when the sun has reached its peak.”

Esmund nodded, “Sure.” He readjusted the sword strap on his shoulder to rebalance it.

“If you need help, just do our whistle call. You remember how to do it, right?” Serena asked. She noticed him fidget at the question, realizing he wasn’t entirely sure. They rarely had to go out to the forest in the first place, so there was no reason to practice or memorize it. It was quite funny, so Serena gave a light chuckle at her brother’s expense. She then placed her forefinger and thumb to her mouth and let out a quick, harmonious tune that echoed through the forest.

Esmund thought it over for a moment, taking in the details and repeated it back to her, though a bit rough sounding. His sister nodded, confirming that he knew how to do the call.

“Alright, since that’s out of the way, let’s part here. We’ll meet back here in a couple of hours, likely an hour around after noon?” she asked.

“Sounds like a plan!” Esmund said, slightly enthusiastically.

Serena let out a sigh of relief, glad that she wouldn’t need to worry about him again. He seemed to be cheering up quickly, she thought. Serena then put her hand on his shoulder and put on a rather serious face, “Just make sure you don’t hurt yourself again like you did a couple of months ago. You remember how bad that was, don’t you?”

“Yeah, actually, though the scars haven’t fully healed I think.” Esmund responded, wincing at the idea of his wounds. He remembered that he was chasing a white-haired rabbit around a tree. It was quite stupid, but clearly the creature wanted to have some fun. *Serena was laughing herself silly*, he snickered, *and then stopped when I tripped over some roots and into a thorn bush.*

“Hm, I would have thought they did by now. I felt so bad for the rabbit, though. Poor thing wanted to be left alone!” Serena burst out laughing as she recalled the event. She let go of Esmund to regain her composure, “Anyways,” Serena paused trying to catch her breath, “Let’s get on with this, shall we? But first...” she drifted off, reaching for the bag that dangled off her side. She untied its loops keeping it closed and reached in, pulling out some soft, rolled up fleece. “You’re going to need this if that happens again. Or at least if you get hurt.” She handed Esmund the bandages, who took them, although he gave a look of annoyance and worry. “Don’t give me that face! I have another one for

myself. I prepared for this, like I always do,” Serena quipped. She tied the flaps together on the medical bag before giving her brother a thumbs up and trotting away, deep into the other end of the forest. Esmund pocketed the soft, small roll hesitantly and set forth to do his duties.

Foraging was a harder task than he remembered, as he had only moved around so much in the immediate area and found a small handful of berries.

“Well, this is unfortunate. Half of these don’t seem terribly edible,” he scoffed, rolling the bunch around in his hand: a mixture of pink, purple, and blue in different sizes. Some were too ripe and fell to pieces with the tiniest bit of movement. Others weren’t even in the proper stage of growth—picked way too soon, he figured. Esmund walked somberly past a few more bushes that had berries, but upon closer inspection, they weren’t ready. “Damn. Bushes this late in the season are supposed to be full of the things. Maybe I’ll have to try my hand at hunting after all,” he said to himself. He shook his head, “No, I should keep looking. I’ve barely done anything, and I can’t give up that easily.”

Serena drew an arrow from her quiver; a deer in the distance raised its head up from the grass. It took quick notice of the huntress, darting its head around and starting to run. Serena wasn’t going to let it get past her. Her focus came to her breathing as she drew back the arrow on her bow. Serena took a deep breath in, waited for two seconds, and then exhaled calmly, tracking the animal’s movements. She let go and a small *twang* rippled through the air. The arrow’s path was short and swift: moments after it was released, it struck the deer in the neck. The beast let out a cry as it reared its hind legs and collapsed to the ground. It was breathing heavily, the wound draining its life slowly. Several moments passed as Serena waited for the animal’s final moments. When the creature lay still, she slung her bow over her shoulder, ready to take the animal’s carcass with her. Serena walked over and bent down on one knee, gripping the arrow from the neck of her victim, trying her best to get the arrow out, “Come on, damn you!” She cursed. Behind her, she heard the noise of rustling leaves. Serena paid little attention to it before standing back up, unable to retrieve the ammo. She turned around; the leaves rustled once more as the wind blew lightly.

“Hm...” she pondered, squinting at the thick shrubbery before her. There was a shadow-engulfed figure standing before her, unmoving. “Oh, Esmund! Didn’t see you there. Find anything yet?” her question almost echoing in the emptiness was answered

with silence. Shortly after, a pair of brilliant red eyes with thin diamond-shaped pupils appeared. Serena's heart dropped and began to race, her hands shaking. *W-who? W-what?!* She took a step back, bumping into the deer's lifeless body with the back of her foot. Serena took a few quick, deep breaths to focus. It didn't matter, she thought. All she knew was that something wasn't right and quickly drew her bow, notching an arrow. "Whoever the hell *you* are, s-stay away!" she threatened, her voice shaking as her eyes darted between the mysterious figure and pair of orbs.

Esmund stopped in his tracks, tired from wandering aimlessly and checking for things to forage. He looked at his surroundings which had changed quite drastically. The trees were even more compact, leaving him only about two dozen feet of open space around him. In front of him was what appeared to be two gnarled trees arching into one another, forming an entryway to a dark tunnel. The forest had countless areas like these, he figured, remembering the entrance that he and Serena had taken. Esmund stared into the darkness and was slowly being pulled towards it. His body was walking without him caring about what might be through the other side. He stepped through the ominous void and was engulfed in a misty fog. It was hard for him to see anything, but he managed to make his way further.

The fog began to dissipate shortly after, revealing an even smaller area. It was a dead end, encircling Esmund and leaving only one way out. There were patches of dirt where grass used to be and dozens of tree branches littering the ground, as were chunks of what looked like shattered rock. The middle of the area seemed to have some type of remnants—perhaps it was the boulder that was now in pieces? Esmund walked closer to the center piece, his curiosity getting the better of him. The boulder now looked entirely different to him as he looked at the material that this was made of. *Stone? That's bizarre. What would something made of stone be doing out here?* He questioned. Esmund drew his right hand forward, unaware of what he was doing. His hand barely touched it when a jolt of blue and white electricity exploded, running up his arm.

Esmund screamed. His arm felt as though it were on fire and being stung by a thousand bees. He tried his best to yank his hand away from whatever it was. Esmund shifted his body backwards and finally freed himself, landing on his back. The electrical substance died down and stopped sparking shortly after. Esmund sat up, wincing at the pain surging through his arm. *Whatever that was... It wasn't normal...* he thought, panting heavily. *I... I must*

bandage this. It feels like I've been burnt. He observed his arm which now had a reddish tone to it. Esmund sat up slowly, avoiding use of his right arm and took out the bandages his sister had given him. *I didn't want to have to use these. Why must I be such an idiot?* He wrapped the entirety of his upper arm and hand in what he could. *There,* he flexed his arm about, although it still felt painful, it was a good deal less than what it was.

A sound faintly echoed through the air. Esmund listened intently, unsure of what it was. He quickly scrambled to his feet and ran back through the way he came. Then the noise came through once more as he dodged his way through obstacles. He turned in the direction that it sounded to come from and continued onward. Something didn't seem right, and he knew that. Moments later, a much louder sound came through and he recognized it as the whistle Serena had taught him. His eyes widened at the realization that she could be in danger. Esmund's hands turned into fists as frustration ran through his mind, hoping that she would be okay.

"Serena!" Esmund shouted as he pushed his way through thick brush. "Are you okay? Where—" he froze. Next to him, buried into the trunk of a tree was an arrow. *She always retrieves them,* he thought. He turned slowly and pushed some branches out of the way and swiftly moved through them. Arrows had punctured numerous trees and the ground. There, in front of him confirmed his worries, horrifying him. He choked on the remaining words he wished to shout out to her. In front of him, almost a hundred feet away was cloaked in purple-black fog. The face was hidden, but the figure held onto Serena, who was battered and bruised. There were small cuts along her face and her eyes were struggling to remain shut. *She's in a lot of pain, what the hell is that figure doing to her?*

"It seems that I've caught two little flies today. It's a good thing that I'll be taking care of this one first," said the figure, its voice distorted.

"W-what? Leave my sister alone!" screamed Esmund.

"On the contrary, I think you should be leaving her alone," replied the figure, "You're both going to die anyways. I can't have witnesses." The humanoid figure pulled out a dagger, waving it in front of Serena's face. The girl began to struggle in his grip, unable to speak.

Esmund was frozen in place, gritting his teeth. *There's nothing I can do.* Tears began to form in his eyes as he watched the knife get pressed to his sister's throat. "Serena!" he shouted at last as the

dagger slit her throat. Her body began to dissolve into small particles while she dropped to the floor. Almost instantly the figure had disappeared, but the last thing he felt was that very same dagger puncturing the back of his chest.