



Tales of Amalon

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Prologue:

Ah, traveler! Welcome. Glad you joined me this fine evening. Say, what about some stories accompanied by some beer?

I have traveled to many countries. Kingdoms from across Amalon, four of them to be more specific. High Valomor, my birthplace. Kingdom of knowledge and peace. R'Oth Vilgmeri, the lands of patriotism, love of oneself, and hatred of outsiders. Ervenia, the kingdom of magic and nature. And last, but not least, Gilded Juval, the kingdom of money, poverty, and assassins.

You may wonder, what is it that differentiates them? Well, Amalon is a place of beauty. Different corners show their beauty in different ways. Be it gold, nature, or just magic. All places have their charm. But, their main difference, is their mental approach to politics. They mind one another but prefer to not wage wars. This preservative yet destructive mindset is what keeps the kingdoms apart.

So then, let's begin where I started. My home, High Valomor...

Chapter 1: Duel of the Fates

Winds had picked up, perfect time for sailors to travel. If they get lucky, they might be able to reach far shores in under 3 days. The deafening whispers in my head were getting annoying, I'd been sitting here for nearly twelve hours and all I'd been hearing was some aspects whispering in my ears. This stuff gets so tiring, being a descendant of a scholar is scarcely a pleasure. Years of studying, meditating, and maybe one day once I'm in a chair fading away, an astral might choose me and make me eternal. I mean come on, I already know the astral arts, I've already nearly mastered the art of the astral sword, why do I have to waste away in this weird and creepy underground town? Makes no sense. Lowval has always been one of my least favorite places, especially the sanitary rooms, always so dirty. I've always wondered what the outside world looked like, maybe one day I'll set sail to the far shores.

I opened my eyes, the sun was setting beyond the horizon, so much so that the stars appeared

and were clearly visible, like a newly polished estea crystal, the ones they used in our military to empower their weapons.

‘Raim! Raim! Hey!’ I heard a female voice behind me, and once I turned around, I wished I hadn’t. It was Vai, the daughter of Nimtha, one of the great magistrates, who built the libraries and the schools. Her step was hasty, which slowly turned into jogging as she approached me. In that time I stood there thinking what to say and how to repel her as quickly as possible.

Finally, once she got close enough, she said: ‘How was your enlightenment?’ She said in a mocking tone, which as always annoyed me.

‘Hey Vai, it’s been alright, nothing special. How about your astral magic training? Heard you had a competition today?’ I asked politely, although I knew I should’ve been more direct and ironic.

She smirked, after which followed her answer: ‘Yes, best of the best. Earned a top spot. Estea medal. Soon, I’ll become the best magician to ever walk the Amalon!’

I always admired her perseverance, a trait not all students had, and even fewer used.

She's a part of the astral mages, who harness the powers of astral to use in sightseeing. Some kind of... fortuneteller. I don't know what that means, but I had assumed that it was a powerful tool.

'Glad to hear that Vai. If you wouldn't mind I need to get going or my master will be angry yet again. I'll be seeing you around.' I finished the sentence off quickly and bolted towards the school building.

The interior of the school was rather fascinating. There were paintings on the walls that represent wars of the past. The scholars always said that if we don't keep this place protected, we might end up on those paintings, an honor of the highest degree. To be honest, I never saw death as an honorable way to go. We've always been told that there's more in store for us, that there's something beyond the plane of physical existence. I'll be damned if I die a common death.

I coincidentally ran into my master in the hall, who after noticing me, stopped in his tracks and

spoke: ‘Raim, what are you doing here? Your training is about to begin, go get your utensils, I want to see you at the fighting grounds in five minutes!’ He exclaimed and continued walking in the opposite direction.

My mentor was Vilda, a one-of-a-kind woman with amazing fighting skills. She is said to be the best hand-to-hand combat expert and has been a trainer ever since the war. I was lucky to have her as my mentor.

‘Ah, at last.’ She said as I approached the fighting circle with my gear. ‘Thaun, you will be versing Raim tonight. It will be a match of Almari duel. I’ll quickly go over the rules:’ she said, and after a short pause continued, ‘This is a fair one-on-one game of non-lethal combat. Both opponents will be using a weapon randomly chosen from the wheel’, she said pointing at the large wooden wheel with many different weapons on it. ‘Best of five rounds, first to three wins. You need to knock your opponent on the ground, without the use of astral magic, only the weapons. You may use any combat style you wish. Am I clear?’ She finally finished.

‘Yes madam!’ Both me and Thaun exclaimed.

‘Let’s see the weapon choice.’ She said as she gave the wheel a mighty spin. After a while, the wheel started losing its momentum, slowing down, at which point my heart was racing, hoping it’d land on a sword. I watched the arrow of the wheel slowly drag further and further until it gracefully stopped dead in the middle of the spear and the sword. ‘Dang it!’ I thought to myself. We kept watching, and to my relief, the slot with the sword on it glowed up.

‘Swords!’ Vilda screamed. ‘Duelists! Cordial diligence!’

This meant that I and my duelist had to start the fight off by crossing our swords and bowing. After which we’d wait in that position until the mentor would drop a red ribbon between us two. The moment the ribbon hits the ground, the battle begins.

She approached with the ribbon while we were hunched over, waiting for the signal. I took this time to calm down and take in the surroundings. There was a lot of space to maneuver, as long as

I kept my cool, I should be able to easily beat him three to zero.

We both tensed up as the ribbon approached the ground. And eventually, the sound of the heavy ribbon hitting the ground ignited the duel.

Immediately, Thaun went for a thrust of his blade. This of course was easy to dodge, considering it was very predictable. I countered him by hitting him in the head with my elbow, after which I followed with a swift kick to his side, which made him jerk backward and almost lose his balance. I then launched my sword forward as I sprinted towards him. Out of reflex, he commanded his sword to block mine, but that left him exposed to my knee kick to his chest, which brought him to his knees. Round one goes to me, two more to go.

The second round start was rough: he pretended to command his sword, which I preemptively dodged, but it turned out to be a fake attack, instead, he punched me straight in the face, followed by a pinch to the chest, and a couple lower to my waist, finishing it all with a very well-coordinated uppercut. The punch had

enough force to knock me off my feet, resulting in me on the ground, dazed.

The third round was solid for him, he let his sword float in front of him, instantly countering any attack I'd throw at him with a sword of my own. I resorted to a kick to his knee, which startled him and therefore let his guard down, and that was when I tried striking, but no luck. He was very tenacious, making it hard to hit him in any way. He was aware of my sword and where it was located at all times. This made it hard to coordinate an attack that would throw him off guard.

Eventually, I threw my sword to my right, which caused him to divert his attention towards it, and gave me the perfect opportunity to strike him. But, I learned from my previous mistake: instead of attacking him, I faked out an attack and instead recalled my sword, which slashed his back. I then struck him, a blow that was enough to throw him back. The second point goes to me.

This was the match point. I couldn't mess this up now.

Starting the round off strong, I struck first and hit him. That was enough to shove him back, but nothing serious. He then brought his sword close to his hands and held it above his head, pointing directly at me. I recognized this stance, he was using the Amu stance, a fine technique to deflect any incoming attack right back at the attacker. I rushed forward, but only then I realized that his sword was now gone. 'Behind me!' I thought to myself and turned around to block the sword, but as it approached, it lost its speed, causing it to freeze mid-air. This confused me a little, and then I felt a strong blow of Thaun's palm in my back, which sent me stumbling forward against the sword. My shoulder got hit by its tip, and I fell.

Last round. I was exhausted. I barely had the strength to keep going, this wasn't looking good. Nevertheless, I lifted my sword and got ready. The moment the ribbon fell, I ducked and struck him against the middle of his chest. This left him breathless, gasping for air, I took the chance to jump and throw a double kick, one at his jaw, and the other at his cheek. He flipped and

instantly fell to the ground. That was it, the game was won.

‘Raim wins!’ Vilda yelled out!

Chapter 2: Souls unfathomable

One particular night, I had trouble sleeping. It was raining outside, and the air was dense, making it difficult to breathe in my room. I silently snuck outside, under the terrace, which kept me covered and safe from rain. I was staring in the distance, wondering... Not exactly sure what, maybe considering leaving this place? Maybe just a bad mood. The sun was vaguely visible in the distance, but the cloudy weather made sure to keep the sun under wraps of the cold grey matter floating in the sky.

‘Troubled sleep?’ I heard an old man’s voice coming from the dim corner of the terrace. I could somewhat see a shadow of a man, and judging by the voice, he sounded old. ‘You shouldn’t get up this early, to ensure you get enough sleep.’ The man moved closer as he was speaking, and once he entered the illuminated area, I recognized him immediately. It was Aradoth, one of the best magistrates of our school. I instantly bowed in front of him: ‘Sorry sir, didn’t know you were here.’

I wasn't lying, it was rare to see a magistrate roaming the halls or resting at the terrace for that matter. They usually reside in their abode without leaving it for months on end sometimes.

'May I indulge asking?' I said politely.

'You may.' He answered.

I looked up at him surprised. I wasn't expecting a positive answer. 'Uh, why are you here at this time, sir?'

He looked at me, then back at the rainy meadows ahead.

'Raim, have you ever wondered what lies beyond these lands?' He answered back with a question of his own.

'What? What do you mean?' I asked confused.

He didn't look back at me, instead, he clutched his fist tightly and continued: 'Your place isn't here Raim. You are beyond the other students here. The formalities, the duty to uphold your father's name, his fame, his glory.'

He turned halfway back to me. 'Seek a life outside these barriers. Seek to be a better person.'

Not because the teachers tell you or the mentors force you, but because you deserve one.'

After finishing his sentence, Aradoth went inside hastily. I tried following him, but by that time, he had vanished.

That conversation left me with questions, but most importantly, ambition. I never sought a life outside here. I always wanted to leave this place, in the hope of seeing wonders outside. But to live there? That was a challenge that I didn't know if I was ready for.

The day dawned, the sun had risen, and the rain had mostly vanished. The classes were filled as always with students eager to learn new astral magic. I as always sat there bored out of my mind. I was never interested in the magic, I wanted to be out there on the training grounds, fighting.

'Raim, please answer.' I was startled as my teacher had chosen me to answer the question I wasn't paying attention to.

'Uh...', I mumbled as I stood up, 'the answer is...' I tried to stall time in hopes of figuring out

what he was asking. After looking at the board briefly, I recognized the patterns drawn on it, it was the astral healing spell, the first thing you learn when you start astral classes. ‘Astral healing, sir. The astral dust and the magic of pure astral combine into one. From there, the user can then cast a spell, and depending on what motion they make, they could cast a healing spell, or a bubble to shield them from any harm.’ I finally answered.

I got lucky there, I didn’t want to underperform during classes. The more ambition they saw in you, the more likely you were to be moved to special training. And I was craving some action right now.

The teacher looked at me confused, and I realized that the class had fallen silent too. ‘Uh... Yes Raim, that’s what’s drawn on the board. But my question was if you had participated in the mandatory rituals class. Don’t tell me you were dreaming away in my class.’

I sat down slowly, this time with more shame than when I initially stood up.

‘Speak with me after class Raim!’ The teacher exclaimed and continued teaching.

Day passed, and the dullness of the courses was tiring. I could barely pay attention to anything the teachers said. We had a break of half an hour. I had gone on a walk inside the school building, further towards the recreational area. On the way there, I noticed a door slightly opened. It is common courtesy to close doors that are left open, and I was about to do just that. But, when I approached and glanced inside, I saw the magistrates sitting in a circle, chanting something. It sounded like an astral chant, some words I could make out. I was getting worried, I wasn’t supposed to be here, I should leave. I turned around and suddenly felt something pull me from behind the door. It was really difficult to resist, as if whatever was pulling me, didn’t put any effort into it. I could hear the magistrates’ distress as I got sucked into... nothingness.

I didn’t know how to take this in, everything was so overwhelming, yet so calming at the same time. It was as if I disappeared off the face of Amalon. It was dark, but I could breathe, very

clean air, it was warm, but all at once I felt like suffocating. I couldn't fathom what I was experiencing. It was then, that a bright light appeared in front of me. It was beautiful, so beautiful that I couldn't look away from it. I felt at peace, its light covered me, and I felt safe.

'Fear not.' I heard a voice say. I couldn't make out if it was one entity talking, or multiple.

'I am but a mirage... You... You are perfect...'

I don't know what they meant by it, but I could feel their stare, right into my soul. I felt afraid. I felt devoid of anything. All emotion was gone.

'I... You... Become one...' That's the last sentence I heard, and after that, a sudden excruciating pain followed. I could hear myself breathing quickly. So quick that I feared I might suffocate right then. After a couple of seconds, which felt like hours, I came back to my senses. I opened my eyes, and the light from the window caressed my eyes, it took a while to readjust to everything. Once I finally could comprehend my surroundings, I looked around slowly and realized that half the school staff was there. The

magistrates were standing behind them, stoic, strangely calm.

‘Raim are you alright?’ I heard a familiar voice. It was Vai, of course, she was here too. I slowly clawed to my feet, having to hold a teacher’s hand lest I’d fall. After that, one of the magistrates guided me home.

When I got there, I felt weak and very sleepy. Immediately I went to lay down on my bed. The magistrate followed me into the room and closed the door behind them.

‘Raim,’ he said. It was Aradoth again. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’m feeling weak. I can barely breathe. What was that? What happened... back there.’ I managed to say before needing to catch my breath.

‘We were making contact with the astral, you happened to walk in there while the ritual was going on.’

I looked at him alarmed: ‘Ritual? Wait, what did you do to me? What happened to me?’

‘Raim, I can feel strong astral energy emitting from your soul. Not the type other magistrates carry, but something far stronger. I suggest you sleep well, and tomorrow we figure out what’s so... anomalous about you.’

He said this and left my room.

I lay there, with my eyes fixated on the ceiling. I couldn’t believe this was happening, this all felt like a bad dream.

‘Finally, he’s gone.’ I heard a voice.

I screamed and jolted up. ‘Who was that?’

‘Relax.’ I heard it repeated about seven times. ‘I am here.’

‘Where is here?’ I asked.

‘Mirror...’ Again repeated multiple times.

I made my way over to the mirror, and couldn’t believe my eyes. The reflection in the mirror wasn’t me. It was someone completely different. Or... something? I couldn’t describe what it was like. It had eyes, but no recognizable shape. It had a voice, but different than anyone else’s.

‘Fear not... we are one.’ I heard it say.

‘What do you mean we are one?’ I asked, my curiosity piqued.

‘Me... You... we are one...’ It repeated.

I heard the door opening. It was my mother, and from the look of it, she was concerned.

‘Are you okay Raim?’ She asked. ‘I heard you scream, is everything alright?’

I looked back in the mirror, but there was nothing. Just the same reflection of me.

‘Nothing mother. I am fine, I just need sleep.’

I said, moving back to my bed. Once I finally got comfortable, I fell asleep in a matter of seconds. What a day this was.

Chapter 3: Unlimited Power

Round about twelve days had passed since the astral bonded with me. My life had turned upside down: my friends stopped interacting with me, my parents became very cautious around me and even I was wary of my actions. I started feeling like an outcast, like I didn't belong here. Every morning, I'd have to move to the magistrates' room, where they'd come together to study my body and discuss what they wanted to do with me.

I started doubting that they did this for my sake. Their tests were centered around the power I had, and how I could control it. The tests they put me up with, were extremely difficult to complete, which I ended up failing. With these reports, they'd sit around their long table, with faces full of disgust, telling me that these runs were futile. The interesting thing is, that they never put up challenges and tests that I could complete. I had zero tests about my strength, or about how to control the astral. It was all about

danger and how much of a threat I could become.

At this point, I understood that the magistrates were jealous of me. Not only that, but also scared. They knew that I could harness power beyond their reach. One person, with power that is stronger than all of theirs combined. Now that is a war machine. But as I'd figured, they didn't want me using my newfound powers, and most of the time counted me out of competitions and combat training, for 'fair play' reasons.

After a while, I started skipping classes and instead focusing on training my powers. I remember one late evening when I was meditating in my room, I could hear it speak.

'Out... fear... They don't want you...' It whispered.

'I know,' I replied, 'they are scared. They cannot comprehend my strength.'

I thought for a bit before asking the astral a question.

'You are immortal. I am temporary. Before you move on to your next body of residence, please

teach me your ways. Help me train your powers. We'll combine our might, and become unstoppable.'

There was a long silence that followed. I thought it didn't hear me, or maybe it just chose to ignore me. It was then that I heard it speak: 'As you wish...'

What followed after was indescribable: Visions of purple, blue, and white all mixed. It was as if I had lost my physical body, and was drifting through the stars. After some time, I saw faces, blurry faces. I couldn't make out the expressions, but I felt judged. I heard scrambled whispers, whistles, and everything in between.

After some time, I had woken back up on the ground. I looked around me, but nothing was out of the ordinary. I went to sleep for the night.

In the morning, I was woken up by a strange feeling, like someone was behind me, watching me. I opened my eyes and realized I was facing the windows. The feeling didn't fade away. I slowly got ready to summon my sword, and with a quick jerk, I got out of bed and turned around while summoning my sword at the same time.

When I turned around, I got into my fighting stance and observed my room. It was then, that I saw a person dressed in all black, straight in front of me. I wanted to strike them, but my sword had disappeared. The confusion hit me, then suddenly I felt something wet coming from my nose. When I checked, it appeared to be blood, and when I pulled my hands away, I saw it, a dagger struck right in my heart. The area hit was surrounded by blood. I started breathing at a higher pace, and after realizing what had happened, I started panicking. I could feel my heartbeat slowing down, my vision getting blurry, and the immense pain that followed after a long delay. It hit me then, I'm dying.

It was black, I can't describe it, just void. Feeling as if I was floating. Through nothingness, still and warm. I questioned where I was, and where all that pain had gone. Everything seemed to disappear, everything was taken away. I looked around, no one was to be seen, but after a small while, I saw a light appear in the distance. It was approaching me, rather fast too. I let it approach, and though I wanted to move toward it, I couldn't, it just wasn't

possible, I was paralyzed. Once the light reached me, I suddenly came back to my senses, it was a lot to take in at once, but the comforting voice of the astral told me: ‘Not your time yet...’

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on the ground with blood surrounding me. I saw the dagger I was stabbed with, in my hands. Whoever had killed me, wanted to play it off as suicide. I lifted my head and saw the assassin sent after me getting ready to depart. I was very weak and couldn’t get up, but I put all my strength into it and eventually managed to stand up with the help of my bed.

The assassin noticed me getting up and stood still out of shock. ‘H-how?’ He muttered.

I was about to start walking towards him but tripped and fell. Realizing I couldn’t walk because of my condition, I got scared that I might not be able to stop him from killing me again. Then I noticed him staring at the dagger in my hand, after which he ran up against the wall horizontally towards me and kicked me in my jaw, sending me flying backward, which caused the dagger to fall out of my hand.

That's when he ran forward and grabbed the dagger. I at this point had almost accepted my fate, and was about to give up, when I heard: 'Leave this to me....'

I lost control of my hands and legs. Soon after, I realized that I had lost control of my body, I could only see, and observe, nothing else.

I jumped up from the ground, snapping my fingers, which made the sword appear, which was nothing impressive, but what happened next took me by surprise: After summoning the sword, I moved my hand over to it, and grabbed it by the handle. I couldn't feel it, it was the astral who was controlling my body. 'Do not you worry child...' it said before lunging at the assassin who had picked up the dagger by now and looked very worried at me. I thought that my opponent would roll out of the way, or dash away at least, but no. It took me a second to realize that the same assassin that killed me, was now impaled on my sword, that had gone through him, the bed, and the wall behind it. After slowly releasing the blade and dropping the assassin, the blade disappeared and I regained control.

Surprised, I walked closer to him and asked:
‘Who sent you?’

He looked at me barely keeping his eyes open.

‘W-w... what are you?’ He said with his last breath before falling dead.

That afternoon, I was called in at the magistrates' table, where they spoke about the death of the assassin and how I ‘slaughtered’ him. I couldn’t help but notice the absence of one of the magistrates.

‘Your presence proves a threat to this establishment young student.’ Said one of them.

‘Agreed.’ Others exclaimed.

‘We must dispose of you before you prove any more danger to –’

‘I was attacked! I was attacked in my bedroom. Someone sent an assassin after me. And coincidentally of you is missing here today.’ I finally snapped.

‘Are you blaming the magistrates council?’ The heavily bearded one said with great distress

behind his voice, ‘How do you dare even mention the possibility of that.’

I left the room without saying anything. Upon exiting the building, I hurried back to my house, where I packed important things in my travel bag and set out to the harbor. By evening, I managed to find a sailor who was willing to talk business for a good price. I had stolen some pearls from my father’s hidden area. I asked the sailor if he had seen any suspicious activity lately, and he told me that he had seen a ship come in this morning from Gilded Juval. I asked him if there was anyone peculiar to welcome the ship, and he described the person to be tall, in a classy robe and a beard. That had to be the missing piece to the magistrates. Did he hire an assassin to kill me? And if so, how? No magistrate goes beyond the shores of Valomor, if this one did, then they must have friends in Juval. However, I have no information about that place, I’d need temporary shelter, and a reliable person to help me. I can’t trust anyone here, I’ll have to set sail, further var-lor, hop out on the first lands we come across. This was a journey I

wasn't ready to go on, but have been craving for a while.

I looked over the horizon, it was grey, full of emptiness, but possible beginnings too. This was my only chance, thus I had to take it. Good luck Vai, hope you become the best sorcerer of Valomor.

Chapter 4: Unknown Lands

After one week of sailing, the boat finally arrived on the first shores. I rushed out of the dense room to see where we had arrived. I saw a large harbor, many docked ships, and people busy moving containers and crates. Loading ships, emptying them, cleaning them, you name it.

‘We’ve reached the shores comrades! Welcome to R’Oth Vilgmeri. For those staying here for whatever reason, I ask you to leave the boat and take a canteen of water with you. For all the traders here, we’re going to be leaving in three days, three days! May all of us have a peaceful stay.’ The captain of the crew yelled out.

When leaving the boat, I made sure that I wasn’t forgetting anything. I couldn’t show anyone that I was abnormal. I need someone to help me find the traitor of a magistrate who tried to kill me.

‘Hey, you! I don’t recognize you, you are not a trader! What are you doing here?’ One of the

working agents asked me as I was leaving the board.

Upon further observation of the interrogator, I noticed that they didn't look like me, their skin was a little more like that of a snake, it was darker green. Their eyes were fixated on me, a little thicker than mine with large pupils. Her teeth looked crooked, and her general gaze wasn't too welcoming.

'I am here with no ill intention miss. I am merely traveling.' I answered respectfully.

She came closer to me and started inspecting me, sniffing me. Then proceeded to rip the bag off my back and started rummaging through it. Once she was assured that I didn't have anything suspicious with me, I packed it back up neatly and swung it over my shoulder.

'Shall that be enough of an inspection miss?'

'Listen here, you stink of overseas smartasses, ones who think they are better because they wear those googly glasses. You must be a Valomorian, filth! Do you know what we do to Valomorians here? SQUASH THEM. Like little rats! If I see

you out there in the streets, do not expect a second warning, filth!’ She screamed in an angry tone. ‘Now, get out before I change my mind, filth!’

‘As you command, miss.’ I said, bowing and moving around her towards the opened gates that led to the city.

Once I reached the gates, it said atop ‘*Impu R’Oth Vilgmeri!*’. I stared at it for a little while, before some guy yelled: ‘Welcome to R’Oth Vilgmeri, scum.’ I turned around, only to be greeted by a band of vandals. They looked quite intimidating, all of them had a dagger at their disposal, and none of them looked like they were looking for a reading mate.

‘Thank you, kind sir.’ I said and started walking away. I didn’t look back, but I could hear swift footsteps on the moldy planks of the dock. I could see their shadows moving towards me from the corner of my eye. I started running, and they followed.

I ran out on a very dirty street, one where everyone looked at me with disgust. I continued further and took the first street to the right. The

pursuers didn't give up, they followed in my footsteps. I was starting to get tired, so I ran into an alleyway, then left and further down. My legs started giving up on me, so I slowed down, sliding to lose momentum. Then I turned around and snapped my fingers behind me, making my sword appear.

The vandals caught up and stopped in their tracks, around ten meters away from me. I felt the gazes of bystanders lay heavy on my shoulders. They didn't do anything, they just watched. This must've been a common occurrence, street fights.

'I do not seek a fight, please turn away and let us end this futile chase!' I exclaimed.

'Oh, look at this one hahaha!' The middle one said, chuckling. 'The *zuthr* doesn't want to hurt us. Oh no, friends help me, I'm shivering!'

The mocking tone of their voice didn't sound too promising. This was bad, I didn't want to make a bad impression on my first day, I just wanted to explore these lands.

‘Listen here zuthr! You better cough up all the shiny things you have in your pockets, and we’ll make it quick, how about that?’ He finally said with a chuckle at the end.

‘Forgive me, scholars, for this once I must indulge outside the school walls.’ I mumbled as I sat on my knees, closing my eyes and beginning to meditate.

‘Hey, HEY! Are you sleeping over there? This zuthr thinks we’re joking, boys let’s get him.’

I heard them starting to run towards me, so I commanded my sword to launch forward, swiftly cutting into the arm of the far left vandal. He dropped his weapon screaming in agony as he watched his hand detach from his arm.

Another one kept running at me, so I recalled my sword and pierced him right through the chest. After that, I readied my sword again for the last guy: ‘I give you one last chance. Turn around, you have lost your men, they might still survive. Go, and heal them.’

The last one didn’t budge for a little bit, then dropped his dagger and went after the comrade closest to me. Once he got here, he started

dragging him away, whilst the third picked up his hand and started running away, leaving behind a trail of green-red blood.

I opened my eyes, stood up, and sheathed my sword by snapping my fingers again. I dusted off my knees and continued further. After a couple of minutes of walking, I arrived at a crossroad, where many salesmen were bartering for their goods. I saw many Vilgmeri carry two types of coin, one I heard to be called the Wisps, the gold ones. The other ones were called Rothies. That seemed to be the currency in these areas. I walked up to one of the stands that was selling food. ‘Greetings, may I have a’ I got interrupted, ‘We not selling to zuthrs, filth. Go find someone else to bother.’

Interesting, no one here likes outlanders, that’s good to know. Further down, I saw a very populated shop, I thought I might find some luck there, so I headed out. After getting closer, I realized that what I saw, wasn’t a shop, it was a tavern. The name was hanging above the open doors, the Drunken Sails.

‘Well, there’s no harm in trying I guess.’

I slowly walked in, an immediate sign greeted my eye, it said ‘All weaponry must be deposited!’ With an arrow pointing to the right. I followed it, and it brought me to a room with a strange-looking door. A stranger emerged from there: ‘Hello there comrade! Glad to have you here at Drunken Sails. Are you keeping yourself armed yes? Haha, well, that’s good, staying safe out there. Sadly, I must ask you to deposit all your weaponry here temporarily. You may take them with you once you leave.’

The stranger seemed very nice, so I told him: ‘Greetings, I am Raim. I do not possess any arms at the moment. I am new here in R’Oth Vilgmeri, and so far my welcoming hasn’t been all too warm, if I may be honest.’ I said politely.

‘Oh... No arms? Well, uh... yeah you can just, head on there,’ he pointed towards a hallway, ‘that’ll lead you to the tavern.’

I smiled: ‘Thank you, sir. May I ask your name?’

He looked at me strangely, ‘my name?’ He asked. ‘My name is... Ronti’

I looked at him with appreciation: ‘Thank you sir Ronti. I’ll be seeing you around.’

I thanked him and went on towards the tavern. Once I entered the large doors, the sound of drinking, burping, singing, talking, and glasses clinking all attacked me at once. The atmosphere was great, everyone was in a good mood it seemed. There were two tables to both my left and my right. Ahead lay many tables, large and small, almost all of them taken. The windows were looking over the busy road where many horses and strange-looking creatures passed by. The busiest place was the middle. Once I approached it, I realized that it was the bar, and it was circular. There were a bunch of people serving drinks all around them.

I went over to an open bar chair I could find and waited until one of the bartenders became free. Eventually, one of them spoke to me: ‘Hello sir, welcome to Drunken Sails, what may I serve you?’ He asked. He was wearing a headband, which was darkened from the sweat gleaming through his hair. He had light brown eyes and a very charming smile.

‘Greetings sir. I am sorry, but I’m afraid I don’t have any of your valuable currency on me at this moment. I am simply here, in search of some company.’ I told him.

He looked at me, but not with disgust, rather with surprise, but I could tell this wasn’t the first time him hearing these words.

‘First round’s on me, traveler.’ He said calmly.

The first person to not call me a zuthr, whatever that meant.

‘Thank you, sir.’

Some time had passed. We talked and spoke about me, where I was from, and what I was doing here.

‘So, you’re a Valomorian, huh? That’s tough buddy, people here don’t like your kin. Then again, they don’t like anyone from the outlands. Tell you what, if you want to make something happen, try not to stand out. Behave well and don’t attract any attention.’ He advised.

‘Thank you for the heads up. Oh also, do you know what ‘zuthr’ means?’

He looked at me surprised, ‘a zuthr?’ He repeated.

‘Yes.’

‘It is a... it’s a slur for the outlanders. People here don’t talk with outsiders as they would with other Vilgmeri. Try to not pay too much attention to that.’

I looked at him annoyed, now that I understood what it meant. That was the last thing I expected to hear from Vilgmeri.

‘Oh... Thank you for explaining. Come to think of it, I haven’t asked for your name, if I may?’

He looked at me and smiled: ‘Jo’Ori good sir. I’m the tavernkeeper here.’

Now I understood why he was so well-versed, he had spent quite some time here. Judging by his name, it sounded Vilgmeri, so he could very well be from here too.

‘And yours?’ He asked.

‘Raim.’ I answered.

‘Nice meeting you Raim!’ He said as he started pouring a glass of light yellow liquid into a wooden mug.

‘I liked your armskeeper here. What was his... ah, Ronti, that was his name. Nice person.’

He paused pouring the liquid. He looked up at me and after a brief delay, put down the bottle and the mug on the bar: ‘What arms keeper? My arms keeper is currently out, getting products.’

I was confused. ‘I was greeted by your armskeeper. Ronti.’

Jo’Ori took the towel off his shoulder: ‘Raim, we don’t have any employee here who’s named Ronti. The only armskeeper is Tharo, and he’s not here right now.’

He then looked at me again and asked: ‘Was he my height, blue skin color, and yellow eyes?’

I started recalling, and he was right, the person who greeted me was indeed blue-looking.

‘Yes, that description matches him.’

Jo’Ori slammed his fist into the bar, looking over his shoulder and yelling at one of the other

bartenders: ‘Hey Joina, I’ll be gone for a minute, take over will you.’

‘Sorry, where are you going? Did I do something wrong?’ I asked worried.

‘No,’ he said. And departed out of the bar. The last thing I could hear him mumble was: ‘God damn you Pumer.’

Chapter 5: Armed and Dangerous

A new morning dawned in my new place. Jo'Ori allowed me to stay on the upper floor of the tavern. The room itself was nice, I couldn't complain. For someone who keeps a tavern going, I didn't expect such a clean bedroom. The walls were dark brown, and the sun shone through the window, marking the small window that was carved into the wooden door that led to the hallway. The bed was croaky but comfortable. The loud shouting of the morning bazaar was to be heard up here.

I stood up and leaned out of the window. The people below were busy. I reached into my pocket to pull out the time teller. It indicated six in the morning, which was considered late in High Valomor. The contrast between the lifestyle here and back home was drastically different. Everything seemed to hang loose here, people were angry but helpful nonetheless. Trade was constant and the shipments were seemingly endless. Back home, everything is so dull and strict. You'd get scolded if you arrived five

minutes too late, or if you didn't pay attention in class. The stress was tough to get through at times, but I was away from all that, and I was happy for once. As much as I didn't fit in here, I felt happier, I felt like the weight of my parent's legacy was lifted off my shoulders.

Dreaming away, I hadn't heard Jo'Ori walking up the stairs, who was currently standing at the door, looking at me: 'Peaceful morning to you Raim. Sorry for the bed, best I can provide.'

I looked at him with a smile: 'No, Jo'Ori I am very grateful for your hospitality. If not for you, I'd be sleeping out there on the streets.'

He walked closer and leaned out of the window together with me.

'I hate this place, but as much as I hate it, this is my home. I cannot part with it.'

'Why not?' I asked.

He looked at me, then stared into the distance.

'See the tower in the distance?' He said pointing in its direction.

I squinted my eyes to see easier, and indeed there was a very tall tower standing very far away.

‘Yes, it is very tall. Is that your Vanguard?’ I asked out of curiosity.

He looked at me, raising his eyebrows: ‘Vanguard?’

‘Barrier, to keep the bad people out of reach’ I responded.

‘No, that is one of the Four. The Nur-Var one to be specific.’ He explained.

I did not understand what he meant by that. He must’ve been talking about a watch tower then. Do they condone violence? Or are they keeping themselves out of the reach of the enemy?

‘Is that to warn the enemies?’ I asked once again.

‘No, it acts as a gate for the Whisperers, some kind of ancient beings that can move between realms. Atop the tower, there is a flame chalice, which can only be lit by them. This indicates that we’re being invaded. The flame warns the

other towers, and the Whisperers there do the same.'

I looked at him: 'Other towers?'

He signaled with his head to follow him, and so I did. We went out into the thin wooden hallway, walking past some kind of storage room, which was noticeably dirty and filled with cobwebs. The smell that protruded from the door next to it, was unbearable, inducing me with a gag reflex.

'Isparian Greatfish,' Jo'Ori exclaimed, 'they always remind me of the Immolation Passing.'

I held my breath, and once we went out of the reach of the stench, I asked him: 'Immolation Passing?'

Jo'Ori turned around and started walking backward: 'After the war, the graveyards were overfilled. Burying corpses together is not allowed. Most of the corpses were burned...' He paused for a moment, then continued, 'My parents were among them. Anyways, from that point on, the government set a law, to burn the corpses at the end of every year, as to send them to a better place.'

‘A peaceful death?’ I added.

‘Would you like to be burned to the crisp?’ He returned a question, a rhetorical one.

Finally, we arrived at the end of the corridor. Jo’Ori opened the door which led to the rooftop of the tavern. Once I got out, I had to raise my hand to protect my eyes from the burning sun. The view from there was phenomenal. The white clouds were hovering over the quiet sea, and the trees in the far distance were blowing with the wind. The rustle of the leaves was in harmony with the bliss up here. Then I finally saw them, the other towers. There were three of them. These were closer, but still not close enough to make out any details.

‘The rest of the Four. They are all destroyed now.’ He said.

‘Are they not being used anymore? Repurposed I mean. Not for waging war.’

Jo’Ori didn’t like my remark, which was noticeable on his face.

‘The towers haven’t been lit for eighteen years. There is no other purpose to them, only blood

and suffering. I can vaguely remember the purple flames that lit atop the towers, on a very cold night. I can recall the sound of horns, and people screaming. My parents got lost in the war. I don't want those towers to be repurposed, ever again.'

I didn't say anything after that. It was clear that war was a sensitive topic for him. Can't say that I blame him though, I too would be devastated if I lost my parents to a conflict.

It was noon, the sun burned even harder, and people in the streets became louder. I was standing at the entrance of the tavern, Pumer was talking to a customer who just entered the building, telling them to deposit their weaponry. Afterward, he directed them to the tavern, and so I approached him.

'Tsk, tsk, Pumer. How long have you been doing this?' I asked him.

He looked at me while polishing the blade he had just received: 'About... I don't know. We Ervenians are not good at keeping track of time. I am a sucker for good design. Look at this blade! The hilt has started to build rust, the

handle is starting to slowly break off, and the blade itself is becoming dull.' He answered.

I noticed that he had difficulties holding the sword, so I asked him: 'Are you okay? The blade doesn't look that heavy.'

'Ah, well that's because I don't know how to handle these weapons. They are not the magic weapons we use. Nevertheless, they can be hidden pieces of art. This one is so beautiful!' He said while handing me the blade.

I took it, but soon also realized that I had trouble holding it. Scholars don't teach us how to wield weapons, only the astral ones, which are projections that we can command, not physically control. The blade Pumer handed me was one that pirates would wield, sabers they called them. The main distinctive part was the handguard and the curvy shape of the blade itself. This one, in particular, had jagged edges, indicating that it had seen battles before. But, it hadn't been taken care of, and Pumer here was already on it.

I handed back the weapon and suddenly heard a loud bang from behind the tavern's inner doors. I

rushed inside and saw a man who I presumed got hit with a glass. They were bleeding from above their eye. Everyone was staring in awe as he pulled the glass piece out of his eyebrow. He then proceeded to grab his opponent and slam him against the bar. The guy dropped unconscious, after which the person who was initially hit, got on top of him and started smashing his face with some sort of knuckle guards, which had spikes on them.

‘Stop this right now!’ Jo’Ori commanded.

The brawler did not pay him any attention and continued without interruption.

Some other severely large man stood up and approached the fighting scene: ‘HEY, didn’t you hear the keeper? Halt!’

He pulled the attacker back, and the unconscious one was dragged away by someone else.

The attacker was relentless and was struggling to get out of the large man’s grasp. That was when he struck him with his elbow, released himself from his arms, and struck him with an uppercut, causing him to fall. Those two continued to fight

afterward, with other people trying to pull them away but ending up in the fight themselves.

The situation was hectic, and getting out of control the longer it went on for. I ran over to Jo'Ori and asked him if he had any way to calm them down.

‘Weapons? No, I refuse to use violence. No one here will use violence.’

I nodded in the fight's direction: ‘I don't think they agree.’

As the fight raged on, one person amongst them was calm and collected. He remained seated and continued drinking his beer. He was dressed in silver, very shiny armor. On his shoulder, there was an engraving of a clutched fist holding a dagger. His hair was leaning to the left, crossing his left eye. His cheekbone had a firm structure, and by the looks of it, he didn't lack muscle either.

As I was thinking that it couldn't get any worse, it get significantly worse when he gets hit by a stray cup, knocking his beer out of his hand. I could've sworn I saw his face turn red from

anger. Shortly after, he stood up took the chair he was sitting on, and smashed it over the nearest guy's head, dropping him instantly and breaking the chair in the process. He then proceeded to grab the next guy by his throat and slid his face across the bar, where the wood splinters and shattered glass had been laid out. Afterward, he moved to the nearest two guys, punching one in the jaw, where the other reacted with a blow to his nose. Recoiling back, the man in the armor threw a punch with all his might, throwing the guy backward toward the wall.

This went on for another five minutes before everyone calmed down. The tavern was completely messed up: chairs were thrown everywhere, many tables were damaged, some even broken in half. People were lying across the floor, covered in beer, blood, sweat, spit, and glass shards.

Pumer was helping people get out of the tavern, and Jo'Ori was aiding people and stopping them from bleeding. The only person still standing upright, was the man in shining armor, which now was no longer shining, covered in all kinds of liquids. I slowly approached him:

‘You sure made short work of them.’ I said looking around at all the injured people.

He didn’t respond and continued staring in one direction.

‘Are you an assassin?’ I asked.

I saw his eyes move in my direction. For some time, nothing happened, he observed me from the top down, breathing heavily in the process.

‘Who is asking?’ He finally replied.

‘Raim of High Valomor. Nice to meet you.’ I reached out my hand in hopes he’d accept to give me a handshake. Instead, he crouched to take a cup from the ground, shoving it in my chest and telling me: ‘Bring me beer.’

‘I am afraid the tavernkeeper won’t be handing out beer for a little while.’ I said looking back at Jo’Ori.

‘Valomorians aren’t welcome here, everyone knows that. What are you seeking?’ He asked in a grumpy voice.

I pulled the nearest fallen table upright, took a chair, and sat down, inviting him to sit with me.

After a delay, he took a chair of his own and sat down across me.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.’

‘Mar’Keth.’ He replied.

‘Nice to meet you Mar’Keth. You are not from around here, mind if I ask what your journey is about?’

He refused to make eye contact with me: ‘I am here to transport *Jarner*.’ He said.

‘What?’ I asked.

He finally looked at me with an angry expression: ‘Poor. People without money. They have no place in Gilded Juval. They sell themselves here as workers. Most of them work as men-pleasers. Whores. Jarner.’

I had never heard of Gilded Juval. He piqued my interest by telling me about, what I assumed to be, his homeland.

‘Tell me more about Gilded Juval.’ I asked him.

‘it is a place of diversity. No place for the weak and poor. If you don’t have wealth, you can’t live, it is as simple as that!’

His description wasn’t exactly making me long to see the place, and he didn’t seem to like me all that much.

‘So you are a guard?’ I assumed.

He looked down at his hand, clutching it: ‘A fighter. I train fighters, but also command ships if needed, or guard them.’

‘Do you have experience with physical weaponry?’ I realized how silly this sentence sounded once I said it.

‘Haha, of course. What else do you call weaponry? Imaginary weapons?’

‘I have a request.’ I finally said.

He glanced at me. ‘I want you to train me.’
Mar’Keth took a moment and then chuckled.

‘I have three days until we depart back to Juval. I can teach you a thing or two.’

I smiled, ‘alright then.’

He stood up and looked down at me: ‘Fishbanks, tomorrow, at seven in the morning. Don’t make me wait.’ He said and walked away towards the doors.

I could see Pumer grabbing something from the armory, it was a strange weapon that consisted of a wooden handle without a guard, and a spiked ball, both of which were connected with a chain. This was accompanied by a decently large metal shield. Mar’Keth grabbed his gear and left the tavern.

I stood up and started helping Jo’Ori.

Chapter 6: Fighting Dirty

‘Therefore, you may not interact with it.’ Said the astral.

I’ve been sitting here, wide awake, waiting for the hour to strike seven, and in the meanwhile, talking with the astral.

‘So, what you are saying is, because you are a being of astral, and this sword is an astral weapon, you can interact with it?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’ The astral answered.

I looked at my sword that was now floating next to my bed: ‘Lucky... Wish I could do that.’

A moment of silence hit the room, only the croaks of the moldy planks could be heard down below. The tavern was still closed, not many people outside and the bazaar was no longer there.

‘What is your name?’ I finally asked.

‘We have many names, Raim. Monsters, gods, ascendants. What would you like to call me?’

I thought to myself, this was a strange question coming from an astral. I always thought they had names, like us, but apparently, they don't, or they just don't have names that we know of.

‘What were you called by your family?’ I asked while standing up from my bed.

‘I do not have a family. That is a concept beyond our understanding, Raim. But I have always been known as Mela.’

So, Mela then. It felt good to know an astral personally, it comforted me, knowing that it had my back if anything were to happen. And that's when it hit me:

‘Mela, I have a question about our first interaction.’ I said.

‘Understandable.’ She answered.

‘When... I died... because I died right? Did you pull me back from the dead?’

‘Death is a mere illusion in our realm, Raim. It is a temporary state of the soul. For only mere seconds here, years pass by, there. Whilst you bemoan the loss of your close ones, they wander

around, very much alive, here. It is only a matter of connection, to reach out to them, and pull them out.'

Her answer left me speechless. I had never thought about death like that. So, the peaceful death principle of Valomor is not even correct? That makes me wonder, what do we know about the astral? Are the magistrates really what they claim to be? Do the scholars even know what they are teaching, or is it a mere waste of time?

I heard the sound of wood scraping the stone outside, when I looked out of the window, I could see the Vilgmeri getting ready for the morning bazaar. Then I looked at my time teller, it was almost seven.

I snapped my fingers, sheathing the blade, and took my new hat and a coat, which Jo'Ori managed to get for me so that I may conceal myself on the streets.

After a short while, I arrived at a crossroads, where I looked around for a sign. I eventually found it, and upon closer inspection, one of the signs was pointing towards the Fishbanks. The direction I had to go in, was open, with very few

buildings and even fewer shade to hide away from the morning sun. While walking, I could feel the sweat dripping down my chin, my back, and my eyebrows. The temperature in Valomor is nowhere near as bad as it is here.

Finally, after walking for another ten minutes, I arrived at the Fishbanks, where I took a path that led further behind the trees. Once the long row of tall light brown trees had come to a halt, a beautiful river had revealed itself. It was bright blue, fish swimming downstream, where the river eventually broke into a waterfall.

‘I like peaceful areas like these. It lets me hide away from people and alcohol’ I heard a familiar voice say.

I looked to my left, and there he was, Mar’Keth himself. Only this time, he didn’t have his armor on, just some simple training pants and a thin shirt. I took my hat and coat off, and sighed with relief.

‘What weapon do you like?’ He asked me.

I just now noticed that he had two barrels stuffed with different weapons. He started looking through them.

‘I’d like to practice the sword, sir.’ I said.

He immediately took out a wooden sword and threw it over to me: ‘Any experience?’

‘Not really, sir.’

He took out a wooden sword of his own and stood in front of me.

‘A sword has its techniques. Each of them can be used in different ways at different times. When fighting, you must keep in mind that your weapon is the only thing that separates you from your opponent. Do not let them confuse or overtake you. The moment you drop to the ground, you lose, be it in training or out on the battlefield.’ He explained.

Mar’Keth proceeded to hold his sword above his head, pointing in my direction. It was a stance I recognized immediately. It reminded me of the training I had a while back.

‘Attack.’ He exclaimed.

I did as he said: I charged in with my sword pointing in his direction, closing the distance rapidly. Once I got close enough, I tried slashing him, which he blocked with his sword. I then recovered and tried stabbing, which he avoided by moving out of the way, using his sword hilt to hit my hand, knocking the sword out of my hands, and pointing the tip of his blade at my chin.

‘You lose. Lesson one: fight slow if you don’t know what the opponent can do. Do not be the first to attack if you aren’t confident in your ability to break their guard.’

He picked up the grounded sword and threw it at me again. As I caught it, he sprinted towards me and started attacking.

I managed to block all of these slashing attacks, but the force behind each slash was more and more difficult to resist. Eventually, he broke through my guard, dropping me to the ground, and yet again pointing his blade at my chin.

‘You lose. Lesson two: Do not let your opponent oppress you. Parry the attacks. Better yet,

redirect their attacks. Use their force against them. Hold up your sword.'

I took my sword and pointed it in his direction. He then showed me how to parry and attack by carrying over the momentum of the blade and recoiling in a way, that I move their weapon in a different direction. After this, I simply had to stab or slash.

Mar'Keth walked away towards a jug of water. He took a wooden cup that was lying right next to it, submerged it in the jug, and took out a full cup of water. After drinking it, he moved back to me.

'In real combat, everything happens quickly. You must uphold your strategy and adapt it if needed in any situation.'

'Attack.' He said, and I yet again attacked.

This time, he was more agile, he didn't use his nimble dodges or brute force. This time he was using the space around us, moving around in angles that were tough to keep up with.

With a quick sweep, however, I managed to catch him off guard on his back. Once he looked

up, he was met with my blade against his chin. And I thought I had won, finally. Suddenly, he grabbed one of my legs and pulled it towards him, unbalancing me. He then used his forearms to push me backward, knocking me off my feet to the ground. After this, he took his sword and pointed it to my chin, this time with his foot on my hand, locking me down.

‘You lose.’

He moved away, and I jumped up.

‘What was that? I thought you said that falling equals losing. That wasn’t necessary!’ I yelled.

He looked at me, sweat dripping down his forehead: ‘Did I ever say that combat is fair?’

He looked away and moved towards his weapons again.

‘You are hiding something kid.’ He said suddenly.

I observed him in confusion.

‘I have fought many men, all good soldiers. I have fought in the war. But none have ever unbalanced me like that. You have been trained

kid, I can tell. So, tell me... what are you hiding?' He said.

I was baffled, I didn't know how to answer that. I was annoyed by the fight, but that was the least of my worries right now.

'I...' I started but hesitated.

'I'm a student of High Valomor.' I finally told him. 'I train the arts of astral weaponry. Weapons beyond the physical realm.'

He looked at me with great surprise:

'Interesting. Why didn't you take it with you?' He asked.

I looked down, hesitant to answer, but come to think of it, he seemed to be a good mentor. He could help me find my way in this world. Maybe even defeat the magistrate who sent out the assassin to kill me.

I snapped my fingers, unsheathing the blade of astral, which hovered next to me.

Mar'Keth looked at the blade with wide eyes: 'In the name of Gold and Wealth. What is that?'

He came closer, trying to take it in his hands, only for his hand to phase through the hilt of the blade.

He pulled his hand back and looked at it. After a moment he said: ‘So, this is astral magic?’

‘No. Weaponry forged by the astral. The magic is practiced by sorcerers. I am not a part of them.’

He walked back and said: ‘Show me what it can do.’

I got in my stance, keeping the blade beside me, and in one quick twirl, threw the blade in the distance, cutting through a large rock and recalling it back to me.

We stayed and trained a little more, exchanging our knowledge of our weaponry. Once both of us had enough, we started packing up, and before leaving, I asked:

‘Mar’Keth, I saw you with a weapon I have never seen before. It is a spiked ball attached to a wooden handle by a chain.’ I requested.

‘It’s called a flail. It is an old weapon. They are no longer used. To wield it, you must understand it, its shape, the way it moves. Recently, a newer version of the flail started to flood the markets. A mace, they called it. Same principle but without a chain, more reliable that way.’ He said.

‘Thank you, sir! Hope we’ll meet again sometime.’ I exclaimed and waved before leaving back to the tavern.

Chapter 7: World of Wonder

I was in deep thought when Pumer came to sit across me. The tavern was almost empty, only a few who had the time to sit down for a drink at this hour.

‘Hey Raim!’ Pumer said.

‘Hey man, what’s the occasion?’ I asked.

He sat up straight, looked around, then leaned closer to me: ‘Look, I have booked a voyage for tomorrow morning. They have a free space for one more, and if you want, I can take you along with me.’

This was a big surprise. I hadn’t expected to move out of the city any time soon. But it’s not every day someone tells you to go with them on travels. So, I accepted, naturally.

‘Great!’ He exclaimed. ‘Meet me at ten, front gates of the tavern. The boat departs at eleven.’

‘I will be there, I told him and took a guzzle of my beer.’

Later in the afternoon, I was walking down the busy streets of Vilgmeri. I just now noticed that the Grace of Ami was visible in the distance. I've never been to that city. It is said that the city possesses the ability to bring luck. I for one, never believed in those kinds of tales.

For the next hour, I went from shop to shop, buying things Jo'Ori had mentioned buying. After I had bought everything, I noticed that he had given me more money than I needed. When I was heading back to the tavern, I saw an old man in a chair outside a house, with a cute animal bound to a collar. I slowed down to take a good look at it. In doing so, it must've seen me too, seeing as it jumped up and started making strange noises.

'He likes you.' The old man said with a chuckle.

I slowly approached them: 'Good afternoon. May I ask what kind of animal he is?'

'It's an orna of course! The most cuddly household pet there is.' He exclaimed.

I came closer to the orna, kneeled and it jumped into my arms, licking my face.

The old man observed the orna's behavior and eventually said: 'Look kid, I am old, can barely hold myself together anymore. This guy here deserves a better life. You can take him if you want.'

I looked at him in shock. Was he willing to give me his pet? I didn't even know how to look after these creatures, but I knew who did.

'Thank you!' I exclaimed, leaving the remainder of my money next to the stranger, and unbuckling the collar. A new friend just had joined our adventures.

We eventually arrived at the tavern. Upon entering, Pumer jumped over the desk in front of the armory and rushed to pet the orna I was walking.

'Loving nature, who is that little buddy?' He said, petting the orna.

'Picked him up off some old guy.' I told him.

'He's so adorable.' Pumer continued.

I eventually made it through the tavern doors and immediately walked over to the bar where Jo'Ori was preparing the drinks.

He saw me coming closer, and said: 'Oh, hey Raim, how did it go-'

He was startled when he saw the orna behind the bar.

'Look, Jo'Ori. You are a good man, with good views, intentions, and care. I thought this would be a good gift for you, to thank you for all the things you did for me.'

Jo'Ori's eyes lit up, as he crouched to receive the millions of kisses from the orna.

'I don't even know what to say Raim. Thank you so much!' He said ecstatic.

We both were smiling, looking at the new pet of the tavern.

'What is his name?' He asked me.

'I don't know. You should give him a good name.'

He looked at him for a moment, before looking up at me and saying: ‘He’s round, like a ball. I’ll call him Bolly.’

‘Welcome to the tavern, Bolly.’ I said to the orna.

Í vaguely heard Pumer talking to someone, so naturally I looked over to my left, and saw him giving what looked like a tour around the tavern, to this woman in a hood.

‘Who’s that?’ I asked Jo’Ori.

He stood up and looked across the room, toward the windows.

‘Oh, that? That’s our bard.’ He said.

‘Man of music?’ I asked.

‘Always have been. I saved up enough to hire a bard for once. I always knew something was missing, and here she is.’

I walked over to where Pumer and the bard were standing.

‘Greetings!’ I said.

Both of them looked at me. The bard nodded and responded with greetings of her own. And Pumer introduced us:

‘Hey Raim. Meet Vai, Vai, meet Raim.’

She removed her hood, revealing her identity. When our eyes met, we both froze. What was she doing here?

‘Vai? What in the astral might are you doing here?’ I yelled.

Pumer’s smile now dissolved into confusion.

‘I could ask you the same, Raim. I heard you had left Valomor. I hated that place too, you should have told me, I’d have come with you!’ She exclaimed.

Pumer was looking from left to right, staring at us both: ‘Wait, wait, wait... you know one another?’

We both looked at him and said ‘yes’ simultaneously. He then walked away to grab drinks, leaving us two.

‘Journeying across the seas is dangerous! What were you thinking?’ I asked her.

‘I could say the same, mister double-dealer. Heard you got an astral in you. Must feel good being immortal now.’ She said.

‘I am not immortal. And it is none of your business. Since when did you become a bard anyway?’ I asked.

‘On my way here, the sailors taught me how to play the kula.’

I’ve seen that instrument around in Vilgmeri before. It is a multi-string wood instrument that produces very high-pitched sounds.

Vai took her cape off and hung it over the nearest chair, after which she sat down and crossed her legs. I sat next to her, and shortly after, both Pumer and Jo’Ori arrived with drinks.

‘So, you are the new addition to the tavern. Vai right?’ Jo’Ori asked, shaking Vai’s hand.

‘That is correct! I must say, this is quite the cozy establishment you have here.’ She answered.

‘We do what we can. Pumer here was my designer. So, all credit goes to him. I merely keep the peace here.’

She looked over to Pumer, and back to Jo'Ori.

‘Oh, so you must be the tavernkeeper that everyone talks about.’

Jo'Ori nodded and took a sip from his mug. Everyone followed.

‘So, tell me. What is your experience?’ He asked.

‘I play the kula. Pretty decent at it. If people here like singing, keeping up simple melody should be easy enough.’ She explained.

‘That, they do.’ Jo'Ori said. ‘Alright, welcome to the tavern. You will start in an hour. Eight in the evening is when we're the busiest, so prepare.’

‘Understood.’ Vai said, taking another sip from her mug.

Pumer finally spoke: ‘How do you two know one another?’

I looked over and answered: ‘We both grew up in Valomor. She was with the sorcerers, I was with the fighters.’

Pumer looked at her, then back at me.

‘So, you guys are friends?’ He asked.

‘Well I wouldn’t say-’

‘Yes.’ Vai interrupted me.

‘What are your hobbies?’ Pumer asked.

‘I like looking at magic, performances, combat duels. And well-versed men.’ She hinted.

‘What do you mean?’ Pumer asked.

‘I’ve always wanted to learn how to handle swords.’ She said flirtatiously.

‘Really?’ Pumer’s eyes lit up. He rushed toward the front of the tavern where the armory was.

‘Does he get riled up like that with every girl?’

My face was planted in the palm of my hand. I could not stand this circus.

Pumer then came back with a bag, no larger than a small sack. He sat down and pulled out a longsword of unknown origin.

‘This, Vai, is the sword of a Gilded Juvali soldier. I acquired this one, a couple of months ago. Proud of this one.’

I looked at him: ‘Not acquired, stolen! Big difference.’

I looked at Vai, who was confused. ‘I didn’t mean it like that... Pumer’ She mumbled.

‘Aren’t you a little too inexperienced to be spouting things like that?’ I asked her.

‘Oh yeah? And you are mister Amalon’s greatest women pleaser?’ She said sarcastically.

‘So anyways,’ he continued, ‘this is a longbow-’ he said pulling out a large bow from the same sack.

‘What is this Pumer! Put that away right now!’ Jo’Ori yelled.

‘What?’ Pumer asked.

‘How can you even fit all of that in there? Where does it all go?’ I interrupted.

‘Oh, this? This I got from a friend of mine,’ said Pumer, ‘he lives in Ervenia. We can visit him once we get there if you want.’

That sounded fun, but I was also very skeptical. What type of ‘friends’ would Pumer have, knowing his personality?

‘Put those away before I take them from you Pumer. Right this second!’ Jo’Ori warned Pumer.

‘Okay, okay. Sorry.’ Pumer said, putting the weapons back where he took them out from.

After a short chat, we dispersed. Pumer went to show Vai her room, Jo’Ori went back to the bar, and I went back up to my room. Tomorrow was going to be a big day, and I needed to sleep.

Once I woke up, the hour had struck nine. I had slept very well and felt very energetic. I packed my bags and went downstairs. There, Jo’Ori was making breakfast, and from the looks of it, he had packed a lunchbox for both me and Pumer.

‘Peaceful morning to you, Raim!’ He said once he noticed me. ‘Come on over and have a quick snack. Keep you satiated for the long travel ahead.’

Pumer was already there, munching on his freshly baked eggs and tasty-looking meat.

‘Hey Raim.’ Said Pumer, once I sat down next to him.

I nodded. Jo’Ori placed a plate in front of me, giving me a fork and a knife.

‘Enjoy.’ He said.

‘Eat up Raim. The boat’s departing in an hour and a half.’

As I started eating, I heard the soft tones of Vai’s kula. It sounded surprisingly good for someone who learned an instrument over a couple of days. The music had put a smile on my face. Maybe her arrival here wasn’t so bad after all.

Chapter 8: Talent of a Fool

The sun shone bright today, exceptionally bright. I waited for Pumer to finish packing up, and in the meanwhile spoke with the customers that walked in.

When I looked to the far corner of the tavern through the open doors, I saw Vai standing there, getting ready. She had a neatly woven wool scarf with a pink dress that reflected light, blinding all who dared to lay an eye on her. For someone that young, she sure knew how to dress appropriately, and her kula playing skills weren't betraying either.

I moved inside, where Jo'Ori was preparing the drinks together with his other bartenders. Pumer was nowhere to be seen yet, so I took the time to talk with Vai.

'Hey Vai.' I said, walking up to her.

She turned around while correcting her earring: 'Oh, hey Raim. I heard you're going away?'

I looked down at the floor. Leaving this place was an emotion that I couldn't seem to conquer. I didn't feel this when leaving Valomor. My mother is there, worrying about me. But I have never felt myself at home. However, this... This was my home. For the first time, I was welcome somewhere unconditionally.

'Yeah, I am. Pumer is leaving for five days, and I am going with him. The voyage will take another five. So we'll be gone for ten days.' I finally replied.

She had corrected her earring in the meantime: 'Well, I guess this is where we say our goodbyes?'

'Yes.' I answered after a delay.

She reached out with her hands, indicating that she wanted a hug, so I hugged her. Afterward, I moved to the bar, where Jo'Ori was talking with a customer.

'Hey Raim. I checked on Pumer a moment ago, he'll be done in a few. Want a drink?' He asked.

'Yeah, I wouldn't mind a drink. Give me a Rambish Ale.' I answered. This was my favorite

drink. The name comes from the wild Rambish in the northern wilds of the White Forest. They are large quadrupedal mammals that can effortlessly survive the cold. It tastes bitter at first, but then the spiciness hits you as if your throat is burning. It is a strangely pleasurable feeling.

‘Here you go!’ Said Jo’Ori, shoving the filled mug towards me.

I chugged it down in one go, thanked Jo’Ori, and moved back to the income hall. Bolly was attracting all the customers at that moment. He was having the time of his life.

I heard the croak of the stairs, it was Pumer coming down, with a fully packed bag thrown over his back.

‘Are we ready?’ He asked once he approached me.

‘Good to go.’ I responded.

We said goodbye to everyone, pet Bolly, and headed out towards the docks. The streets were not as crowded as we expected, the bazaar was not set up yet, so most Vilgmeri were still at

home. The docks were freed up. Most ships had left or were leaving, one of them being our ride.

‘Hey, you two! You with us?’ The captain of the ship yelled out.

‘Yes. Pumer and a travel buddy.’ Pumer replied.

‘Aboard! You’re the last, we can leave forty minutes earlier.’

And so we did. After boarding the ship, the sailors greeted us and handed us a bottle of water for the road.

Time flew by quickly. The journey was very successful with no hiccups. The seas were calm, the wind helped us for the most part. Rest of the voyage we played some fun games. My favorite one was Aintuli, a card game originally from Gilded Juval. The cards are all different from one another. All of them do different things and are useful in their respective situations. The Gilded Sword card is put in the middle after being used. It is reusable but only one person may wield it at a time. The goal is to trade in other cards, and have only the Gilded Sword card remaining in your hand. It took me a couple

of games to figure out how to properly play it, but understood it eventually.

I introduced them to a spark of astral magic. Simple tricks, such as illuminating my hand, creating star-like particles, and levitating small objects. It was the best voyage I had experienced so far.

We arrived at the docks of Ertho Kal on the dawn of the sixth day. The bay was busy, ships stretched out all across the shore. Once we docked, we were greeted by the Ervenians with a glass of locally produced Yala. It is a light alcoholic drink that tastes sweet. They said it symbolized our stay here, so that it may be peaceful and sweet. I liked these people already. Much kinder than the officers at Vilgmeri.

Pumer led the way forward. Ertho Kal was a dense city. Many of its inhabitants were living on the outskirts. The trade was mainly held in the center, where they bartered for goods and money. Interestingly enough, their money wasn't made of any metal. It was a special kind of wood, which was produced by a few trees in the northern forests of the continent. They didn't

chop them down. They didn't harm nature at all. Nature interacted with them, it took weird shapes and forms. This land was truly something else.

'Liking it so far?' Pumer asked me as we escaped the loud trade center.

'It is amazing! How do you guys manage all this?' I asked.

'It is a delicate process. My ancestors built these lands from the ground up. This is the fruits of their labor.' He responded proudly.

I've never seen Pumer so calm before. It felt like I was dealing with an entirely different person.

On our way to Cusomi, we passed many interesting places:

The Initho Eza, a large tower in the middle of the city, which helps sailors find their way at night;

The Alumino, a set of statues believed to be the original inhabitants of Ervenia;

The Luti stand is a large remnant of old architecture, made up of rocks and wood. Sadly,

this is the only thing that remains of the old era of Ervenia. Most of it is gone, buried by history.

Once we left the city gates, we paid for a chariot ride to Cusomi. The road was wobbly, not as straight as in Vilgmeri. The nature was very colorful: the trees had all kinds of colors. There were open fields with weird flowers embedding them. Some weird-looking animals were running around. Everything seemed very dreamy and surreal.

Eventually, we arrived at Cusomi, where we got off and looked around a bit. After some time, Pumer told me to follow him, and he started running. I followed his swift steps, trying to ask him why we were running, but I couldn't get to him. Finally, we arrived at a house. It looked old, overgrown with leaves. The walls looked moldy brown and the roof was dark orange. The windows were very dusty, to the point that seeing through them was impossible.

'We arrived!' Pumer said all excited.

'Where?' I asked.

Instead of answering me, he ran up the stairs that led up to the front door and knocked on it five times.

‘I’m coming!’ I heard a muffled scream from the inside.

The person opening the door must’ve knocked over pots, which I deducted from the loud metallic sounds that came from the house. Eventually, they opened the door: ‘Pumer!’

I watched as the two friends jumped into one another’s arms. After a couple of seconds, Pumer moved away from the door, revealing the stranger to me. He was about my height, hunched forward, wearing a dirty white robe and worn black shoes. His skin color was darker than mine, and his eyes were bright blue.

‘Who is he?’ The stranger asked Pumer.

‘Oh, he’s my friend. Wu, this is Raim. Raim, Wu.’ Pumer introduced us.

‘Zo Rei Wu. The enchanter, best one in fact.’ Wu added.

‘Nice to meet you, sir Wu. Sorry, Zo Rei Wu. I’m Raim, I come from the far shores of High Valomor.’

He inspected me from top to bottom. He wasn’t fond of me from the looks of it. He didn’t look all too appealing either.

‘Come on in.’ He said finally.

He led us into his house, which was extremely messy. Papers on the ground, dusty surfaces, some kind of a cauldron brewing, and a bunch of weird insects.

‘Do not mind the small mess. I’ll deal with it momentarily.’ Wu said.

We passed through his kitchen, which was overflowing with moldy food. It connected to a room in the back, which I’d assumed was his workspace. There, he pulled a lever, which unfolded a wooden table in the corner of the room.

He brought in two extra chairs and placed them next to the table. We all sat down, me and Pumer started taking our bags off and placing them on the floor.

‘So, care for a drink?’ Wu asked.

We both nodded. Wu snapped his fingers, making three glasses appear on the table. He then took a bag, which looked exactly like the one Pumer had, and took out a large bottle of Yala. He filled all the glasses, which we raised and toasted for nature and sweet life.

We sat there for a while, talking to one another, those two catching up, me and Wu getting to each other better. Turns out, he’s been practicing enchanting for a very long time now.

‘What kind of enchanting do you practice?’ I asked.

‘All kinds. I practice ithiru the most, you know, using potions and spells to create enchantments. Other times, I learn optitari, their symbols are hard to decipher and often take up all the time I have, thus I try to stay away from that.’ He answered.

‘He’s the one who enchanted the tavern.’ Pumer informed.

I honestly didn’t even know that the tavern was enchanted.

‘Pumer! What did I say about telling outsiders about my magic?’ Wu yelled at Pumer.

‘Wait, the tavern is enchanted? Wow, I did not know, sir Wu. May I ask, what you did to it?’

He looked at Pumer angrily, then back at me: ‘It’s an ithiru enchantment. It repairs the tavern should it take any physical damage.’

‘How does that work?’ I asked again.

He licked his lips, looking kind of nervous at his glass: ‘It does a bit of *yuima* and sometimes changes into *tilis*. Yeah, pretty complicated for a simple mind like you. But I get it.’

He swiftly left the kitchen and started looking for things. I looked at Pumer confused.

‘What?’ I stated.

He shook his head slowly: ‘He made those up, those aren’t real words.’

I stood up after a moment and started looking around the room. It was filled with interesting documents, mostly research, regarding the magic. He had a bookshelf built into his wall, with a lot of different books, some of which I

recognized. The one that caught my eye, was the ‘Subtle Power of the Rynki enchantments’, a large blue book that stuck out of the rest. I wanted to inspect it, but upon pulling it, I felt the book pulling back. I let go, and the book slotted back in, starting up some kind of machinery, which slid the bookshelf into two and opened, it was a door.

I heard the footsteps from the kitchen rushing over to me, screaming ‘No, no, no! Not that!’.

I took a step back as Wu waved at the door, releasing some kind of dust from his hand. A moment passed by, but nothing happened.

‘Darn, you! Why now? Why couldn’t you work now.’ He screamed at his hand.

‘Master Wu!’ I heard a high-pitched voice coming from the newly opened door, ‘As per your request, we have delivered you the new ingredients for your research.’

I looked to my left, where I saw a little guy standing, dressed in blue clothing and a brown hat. He had a wide smile on his face, which was borderline creepy.

‘Hey Riivi. Leave them at the table, I’ll take care of them.’ Wu commanded him.

‘Hey there!’ I greeted the little guy.

‘Oh, this is going to be interesting.’ I heard Pumer mumble.

I looked at Pumer, then at Wu: ‘Who is he?’

Before he could answer me, a bunch of those little people came running out of the door. I looked up at Wu.

‘They are grotl. They are from a different dimension. They, like... working...’

I looked at him questioning. ‘What do you mean?’

‘He means that those little grotl, are little slaves working for Wu.’ Pumer said.

I looked at Wu, with a judging face. ‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Well I’m a busy man, I need help. Besides, it’s none of your business.’ He yelled at me.

And why did I think that Pumer’s friend would be any better than him?

Chapter 9: The debt

My stay was coming to an end. I was getting ready to part with Ervenia. Shame, I was having a lot of fun here. On the second day, Wu took me and Pumer to the Cusomi shore to see the ships passing by. We went to a tavern nearby and had some drinks, while Wu explained enchantments:

‘And that’s why any enchantment can be cast by anyone capable of reading rynki. It took me years to understand the symbols, but it was worth it.’

I looked at him with raised eyebrows: ‘Worth it? In the sense that you now can use the enchantments to mind control the grotl into forced labor?’

Pumer chuckled, but Wu wasn’t very amused: ‘You shut it! The enchantment is harmless, they don’t even feel anything. It’s like... sleepwalking. Once I remove the enchantment, they can get back to whatever filthy grotl stuff they do.’

‘Loud words, coming from you.’ I said to Wu.

Pumer laughed louder this time. We finished our drinks and turned to the shore, which was very shiny at this time of the day.

‘Come to think of it,’ I started, ‘the Vilgmeri council doesn’t want the tavern to exist, right?’

Pumer nodded: ‘They despise Jo’Ori for that. He was a little kid when his parents died in the war, they were immigrants from Var. I don’t know which kingdom, never been out there before, but they weren’t welcome there. Upon immigrating to Vilgmeri, they were further harassed.’

That was news to me, Jo’Ori never really spoke much about his parents, and who they were.

‘However,’ Pumer continued, ‘they still fought during the war. They treated R’Oth Vilgmeri as their home, thus they defended it. Poor them, their demise was uncalled for. Jo’Ori grew up as an orphan.’

That must’ve been tough for him. Poor guy. After a pause, I asked: ‘In that case, has the council left him be? Why haven’t they gotten rid of the tavern yet?’

‘That is because of that guy.’ Pumer replied pointing at Wu.

Wu raised his head when I looked at him. He was proud to have heard his name.

‘He enchanted the tavern. And Ervenian magic is scary to the outsiders. They don’t understand this magic, so they don’t trifle with it. To you, the tavern looks normal, but to us, it is shrouded in grey-colored magic.’

‘Wait, what?’ I asked amazed. I have been interacting with Ervenian magic this whole time. That’s unbelievable.

‘Yes.’ Wu replied.

After staring at the shore for another couple of minutes, we moved towards the market, bought some goods, and went back to Wu’s abode.

On the third day, Wu took us to the nearby forest. We packed up and went camping out in the open. It was quite something, I never knew Pumer was afraid of large insects:

‘Wait WHAT?’ Pumer yelled when he heard Wu’s idea. ‘We’re going camping?’

I looked at Pumer, I had never seen him this stressed. ‘Is there a problem Pumer?’

He looked at me, stressed: ‘Oh no, no problems... except the huge insects. Have you ever seen a picofly? They are as large as a Vilgmeri kotl!’

‘Aren’t the kotl two meters long and a meter wide?’ I said.

‘YES!’ Pumer screamed.

Wu looked at Pumer, then at me: ‘a picofly is about the size of a small orna.’

So, he indeed was exaggerating. Although, once we arrived there, the insects weren’t that small either. R’Oth Vilgmeri has small annoying insects, whereas Ervenia houses large harmless insects. The rest of the day went by smoothly, for us that is, while Pumer was sweating from fear. All in all, a great way to spend the evening. Stargazing to top it all off, and that made the recipe for a very peaceful night.

The fourth day, was fun: we went to the inner Ervenia, to the capital. It was so beautiful there. The green dominated the entirety of the castle

walls. The people there were very kind and helpful. We listened to a band play, I had never heard Ervenian instruments before. It was a fine day. And now it's the fifth day, tomorrow morning we'll be heading out.

'Hey Raim.' I heard Wu say as he came downstairs to sit across me.

'Hello Wu.' I replied.

'Say, I have a thing to discuss with you.' He said leaning closer to me. 'You see, a while back, I had made a deal with one Juvali soldier. I asked for goods, and he wanted gold in return.'

'Alright. Go on.' I said.

'Well, my payment is overdue. But I've been able to finally collect the money to pay off the debt. The problem is, I can't leave my workstation at this moment. And since you and Pumer so conveniently leaving tomorrow, may I ask that you transfer this bag of gold to the soldier?' He asked, holding the bag of gold in his hands.

I took a good look at it. The bag was filled with small gold coins, each being worth around five

Wisps. I then looked up at him and said: 'I would do it, but we're heading to Vilgmeri.'

'Don't worry about that, I asked Pumer, and the ship you are taking will stop in Juval, it's on the way.' He ensured.

'Well, if that is the case, and you are sure to trust me, I will bring this gold to them. Who is it that I'm searching for?' I asked.

He shrugs: 'I don't know his name. All he said, was to ask around for a guy named 'Eagle'.'

'Alright, I'll do my best.' I replied and put the gold away in my bag.

'Oh and by the way,' Wu said, 'here's an amulet I made, please take it as a sign of my respect.'

Wu handed me a round amulet, which had a slight green glow to it. It was made of stone, with a little green pearl slotted in the middle.

'Thank you, sir, Zo Rei Wu.' I said.

'And thank you, Raim.' He answered.

For the rest of the day, we went swimming in a nearby lake. The water was clear as day, with an

emerald green tint to it. I hadn't gone swimming in a long time. It was so refreshing and relieving. The water was mild, the perfect temperature and the lake was large enough to do some recreational diving. I couldn't have asked for a better way to spend the day.

After an hour or two, we came out and left the lake. While drying myself, the amulet that Wu gifted me fell out of my trousers' pocket. Once I noticed it, I picked it up and put it around my neck. May it bring luck indeed.

Chapter 10: Deceit

The air here was dense, much denser than in Ervenia or Vilgmeri. The tides were calm, the sea bashed against the docks with little force. The sailors were trading in goods for gold. I even saw a couple of sailors bringing in crates of gold figurines. How can one disregard the value of their currency? Everyone at the dock looked so expensive, entangled in massive jewelry, and expensive-looking wrist devices, all very well dressed, with gold accessories. It was overwhelming to see at first.

‘State your name and reason for your visit.’ The guy closest to me yelled out. He was wearing a bright yellow uniform, with black trousers and a white shirt underneath. He had a third arm on his back, it was significantly longer than either of his other arms. Come to think of it, all the agents I saw here had something extra: an eye, an ear, an arm...

‘Raim. Me and my friend Pumer are travelers, coming from Ervenia.’ I explained.

The guy looked up from his papers, and then back down: 'Raim, I'm sorry to say but you are not on my list of important traders, so give me a valid reason or you and your lover there can disperse immediately!' He said in an aggressive tone.

'We came to find the Eagle. Business talk.' I said shortly.

His eyes lit up. He seemed surprised, considering how long it took him to reply.

'Y-you may proceed then. I will have my men accompany you to Mister Eagle.' He answered stuttering.

This was surprisingly easy indeed. Judging by his response, the Eagle wasn't just a casual guy, he was a big deal. Mentioning his name was almost a blessing to them. Or a curse. They brought us to a cart bound to four animals I hadn't seen before. They were about the size of a horse and ran quickly. Inside the carriage, we didn't speak much, seeing as the men accompanying us were quite unfriendly looking.

Eventually, we arrived at some kind of a large building that looked like an average tavern. There, we entered a red door that led down to, what looked like, a basement. Afterward, one of the men unlocked a door, and upon opening it, the inside blinded us.

Walls covered in gold, chandeliers that shone in golden colors. Different heads of animals in single file lines, all across the wall. It looked like something of a tale. Further down the large room, some hallways diverged in different directions. We took the one to the right, going forward, and then the first left. It led us to some kind of a feast room with a long table and many chairs all around it, with a couple dozen people occupying them. Once we got through the doorframe, they turned their heads to us.

‘Sir! You have visitors!’ One of our acquaintances said.

The person sitting furthest away looked up at us. ‘Is that so?’ He said in an amused tone.

‘Yes sir! Ervenia.’ The other finished.

‘Nature admirers, huh?’

Me and Pumer looked at one another in confusion. What business did Zo Rei Wu have with this guy?

‘I am Raim. This is my friend Pumer. We are here to deliver you, your payment.’ I told him.

I could see his facial expression change from amused to focused in a split second. ‘A delivery? For me?’ He asked confused.

‘Sir!’ One of the other guys at the table stood up with their hands behind their back, standing stoically. ‘Forgive me, this must be my client, who had delayed his pay, and now must be sending others to cover for him.’

The guy’s tone became more hostile: ‘I’ll deal with him, sir!’

He started moving closer to us. I, in turn, shoved Pumer behind me with one hand and readied to unsheathe my blade.

‘Halt!’ The Eagle called out.

Everyone looked at him: ‘Tyza, have you lost your mind? These travelers have come here, all the way from Ervenia. Don’t shoot the

messengers. Instead, how about the ladies here brew us some of our specialty kya tea?’ He suggested looking at the maids.

The maids immediately went away, while Tyza went back to his chair. He seemed agitated but listened to the fancy Eagle at the end of the table, he really must mean something to them.

‘Oh please, excuse me for the bad welcome. Take a seat.’ He pointed to two free chairs.

We went and sat down, being wary of our surroundings. Soon after, the maids came back in carrying wooden pallets with golden cups on them. They distributed the tea, and swiftly left the scene.

‘So, Ervenia then? You must be very hungry. Don’t you worry, the meals will be out by noon?’ He said. ‘Now, tell me more about you. I’m curious.’

I analyzed him. He had a scar on his left eye, his hair was dark, and his skin color was that of a black orna. He wore a black wool cape, which looked like masterwork, leather gloves, and dark brown trousers.

‘May we have the pleasure of knowing who we’re speaking to?’ I asked.

The Eagle hit the palm of his hand against his face: ‘Where are my manners! I am Ryo Bin, the second son of Haki Bin. Welcome to the assassins guild!’

Everyone had cold stares, ones that pierce your soul. Talking was tough as if someone was choking me.

‘I am from High Valomor, traveling around with Pumer here, who is from Ervenia.’ I said.

Ryo Bin listened carefully to what I said and proceeded to take a sip of his tea. He then got up and said: ‘I have traveled to many kingdoms. What is it you search?’

‘Nothing particular. Just traveling.’ I lied.

He nodded and sat back down. ‘Well then, may your travels be safe, Raim and Pumer.’ He took another sip of his tea. ‘Say, when are you leaving?’ He then asked.

‘Tonight.’ Pumer said.

Ryo Bin grinned. He then turned to a door to his right and yelled: ‘Maids!’

The two girls immediately stormed in. ‘Can’t keep the guests waiting now, hot meals please!’ He commanded, and the maids rushed into what I assumed to be the kitchen. Not even five minutes later they brought out their first dish, which was a roasted animal of sorts that I hadn’t seen before. It must be native to Gilded Juval. After the table was set, everyone started eating.

The meals were great. One of the best I have ever eaten. However, the wine tasted weird. I preferred the tavern’s drinks. Despite being assassins, everyone here was eating with manners, very tidy.

‘Sir Ryo Bin, if one of the assassins from Juval were to leave for another kingdom, you would know about it, I presume?’ I asked eventually.

Ryo Bin stopped eating and looked at me. He put down the meat he was eating, drank from his cup, and then answered: ‘Yes’

Followed by: ‘However, I have rules regarding contracts outside Juval.’

I nodded, and asked: ‘Do you have rogues’

He took a while to answer. ‘I doubt it. Rogues don’t live long in my guild.’ He continued eating his food.

Interesting. Was the assassin sent after me, from this guild? Was he a rogue? Or maybe against Ryo Bin’s principles? Or did someone just pay a good bit of money? I had to figure this out.

‘Since you two are going to be leaving soon, I’d like to invite you to the syada races.’ Ryo Bin said.

I looked at Pumer, awaiting his answer. Eventually, he nodded. ‘Sure.’ I said to Ryo Bin.

‘Very nice!’ He said all excited.

Sometime later, we were brought out to the front doors, where a carriage was waiting for us. We got in and they took us deeper into Jua La Va. The streets were relatively clean. The people living there, not so much. Seemed like all the poor people lived in the center. It was a huge contrast with the noble rich people living their best lives. The houses here were half rotten, the smell polluted the city, and the inhabitants were

not so happy looking. I could hear screams coming out from different houses, some of which seemed terrifying. I sure was glad that I didn't live in Juval, the life here seemed all too scary.

When we arrived at the destination, we were met with a huge building, called the stadium. Here, the races were held, where people bet on different syadas and made a lot of money. I had never seen an activity such as this one.

Ryo Bin's carriage arrived after us. When he came out, he told us to follow him and led us to the golden seats high up. The stadium was oval. From the looks of it, the syadas would start at the beginning of the track, going in a circle. Presumably, the one that finishes the track first, wins the game?

We sat down on the chairs above the crowd. It was extremely loud. The people below seemed to be the poor I saw earlier, while the richer ones were separated and sat above. This was a schism I had never seen before.

'May I indulge?' I heard Ryo Bin ask Pumer while holding a glass and some kind of an

alcoholic drink. Pumer nodded, and I answered the same.

Time went on, and I started to get bored. Judging by Pumer's face, he was completely uninterested in this game.

'Just a little longer I think. Then we can head out earlier.' I whispered to Pumer. 'I asked the captain before leaving, there was a second ship that docked in with us. That one leaves today, in a couple of hours.'

Pumer smiled and agreed to my idea. And after a couple of minutes, we went up to Ryo Bin, who was sitting in his dedicated special seat.

'Sir Ryo Bin, thank you for your kind welcome. Sadly, we forgot that we have work to do on the ship.' I said while we bowed.

He looked at us: 'Oh, so soon? The most fun part hasn't even begun yet.'

I put my hand on my chest: 'Excuse us.'

He sighed, and said: 'Fine, I guess we can get to the fun part early, shame though.'

Suddenly, Pumer got stabbed in the back, I could see a blade sticking out of his chest. I felt that someone was behind me, so I recoiled and turned around while snapping my fingers, unsheathing my sword, thus cutting the attacker in half. I was about to turn to Ryo Bin, but I felt a heavy hit against my head, which dropped me to the ground, dazed. The last thing I saw was Pumer's eyes extinguished, as I took a boot to the face, knocking me unconscious.

Chapter 11: As we fall

I saw a moldy brown ceiling upon opening my eyes. It took me a moment to come to my senses, once I did, I tried getting up, but quickly realized that something was holding me down by the neck, hands, and legs. I lifted my head as high as I could and looked down at my body. I was tied to some kind of a metal bed by cuffs I'd never seen before.

‘Welcome to the land of the living, hope you had a good nap.’ I heard someone say from the shadows further in the room. A second later, Ryo Bin emerged from there.

I immediately tried snapping my fingers, but the bastards had tied my fingers too. This was weird, why tie my fingers if you already locked my hands? No one does that, not unless...

‘Wow, well done Master Ryo Bin.’ I heard a familiar voice say. ‘They don’t lie about your well-deserved title.’

When they came into my vision, I recognized them, it was Aradoth. I should have known it was him. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen him ever since I bonded with the astral. He was most likely the one missing from the table that day.

'How could you! You, a respected magistrate!' I yelled at him.

He chuckled, 'your part is done here,' he said looking at Ryo Bin. 'Your payment awaits you outside.'

'Pleasure doing business.' Ryo Bin answered, shaking his hand.

'Assassin filth. Of course, why did I even think for a moment that you were clean.' I insulted Ryo Bin.

He looked at me, smiling: 'Business Raim. Besides, good soldiers follow orders.'

Once Ryo Bin left the room, Aradoth came closer, inspecting me.

'You know, I couldn't cope with the fact that you had stolen my moment.' He said.

I was confused, what did he mean by 'stole'?

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The astral, Raim, don’t play stupid. We held an ascension ritual. The astral was bound to choose me as its host. But you, you were chosen instead.’ He walked around the bed. ‘And I couldn’t handle that. I tried warning you, I tried telling you to leave. But no, you had to be there, you just had to interrupt it.’

How did he know that he would’ve been chosen? Or better yet, how’d he know I would’ve interrupted the ritual?

‘What?’ I asked.

‘You were always an outstanding fighter. Your astral mark was always stronger than mine. I watched you from my abode, every day as you trained, and became stronger.’ He took a short pause. ‘But why? Why is your spirit stronger than mine, when I devoted all of my life to the astral.’

‘Your problem is greed! You want power, but you are not destined for it.’ I answered. ‘You always said, that we should be humble, we

should respect our elders, and respect each other.' I yelled in an aggressive tone.

'Oh my,' he said amused, 'you and your morale ideologies. Have you ever realized what you were doing at the school? I mean, have you ever understood why you were chosen as an astral fighter?'

He got me curious. He wasn't wrong, I never realized why I was doing all this, this training, studying.

'It's because, from birth, you carried an astral mark. I was the best in my field. But you were better, not by training, but by chance.' He exclaimed.

He lay his hand on my chest, 'but today, that changes', he said as he started chanting some kind of a spell. Then, he slowly started lifting his hand, with purple particles following it. Aradoth's eyes turned blue, and so did his hand.

Suddenly, an excruciating wave of pain hit me. It was very sharp and continuous. I wanted to move, but I couldn't, I could barely handle it. Eventually, the pain stopped. I was sweating, my

eyesight was blurry. I could barely see Aradoth, with something purple in his hand.

‘At long last returned to its rightful owner.’ I heard him say. ‘Thank you, Raim, may your soul find peace.’ He added, stabbing me in my chest with a dagger.

Everything went black. I could hear my breathing, it was calm. I didn’t hear anything, it was serene and silent for once. There were no whispers, chants, or screams. I felt like I was floating in the void, swimming in the dark.

Then, I thought of contacting Mela, my astral. I tried reaching out, but no one replied. It tried again and again, but nothing in reply. After a while I realized that my efforts were futile, it wasn’t there. I was confused, but then it hit me. Aradoth, he did something to me. Did he steal my astral? He stabbed me too, so am I dead? Am I a soul, waiting to be fetched?

It was then, that I saw a light emitting from afar. It got brighter and brighter, brighter than the sun in Vilgmeri. I wanted to touch it, it was so close. I could feel its warmth, it was a rock thrown away.

I woke up, took a deep breath, and started coughing. I looked around frantically and realized I was still bound to the table. I saw the dagger lying on the ground, with some drops of blood around it. I couldn't move, no matter how much I tried. I screamed in my lungs, feeling powerless and weak, the inability to move was driving me crazy.

Suddenly, the door to the room got smashed in. When the dust of the moldy door lowered, I could see someone standing there. It took me a while to recognize their shape, but eventually, I did, it was Mar'Keth.

'Quickly.' He said, rushing to me, and releasing me from the table. 'You okay?' He asked.

'For the most part, yeah.' I answered, feeling around my body. I pulled up my shirt and looked at my chest. 'You genius.' Zo Rei Wu's amulet had caught the blow of the dagger.

I got up, tried snapping my fingers, and to my relief, my blade appeared. 'Thank you, Mar'Keth. How did you find me?'

He looked at me: ‘I saw them dragging you in here. I had to stay low, not to alert the assassins outside. Once they cleared, I moved in. Hope I didn’t come too late.’

I smiled: ‘I’m alright. Adaroth on the other hand, now isn’t. He took my astral, who knows what he wants to do with it.’

‘Who? What is an astral? Are you talking about your sword?’ He asked.

‘No time to explain, I’ll explain later. For now, we have to get to the tavern as soon as possible. I will need your help.’ I said reaching out my arm.

He looked at me, and after a delay he grabbed my arm, signaling that he was in.

After a couple of minutes, we managed to find a chariot, which we took to the docks, there we tried finding a ship that would depart immediately.

‘Damn it!’ I screamed. ‘None are departing today.’ Me and Mar’Keth stood around trying to think how we could get to R’Oth Vilgmeri.

‘Need help?’ We heard someone say. The voice was coming from beyond the torches’ light. By squinting my eyes, I managed to barely make out who it was.

‘Oh, you bastard!’ I screamed while unsheathing my sword and charging towards the voice.

Ryo Bin came out in the light. I tried attacking him, but he dodged it. Then I threw attack after attack, but none of them landed. For my last attempt, I threw my sword at him, while charging in on the side. While he dodged, I attempted a leg sweep, which he noticed and jumped up, and in that moment Mar’Keth delivered a devastating blow to his head, knocking Ryo Bin to the ground.

I recalled my sword and put it against his neck and throat: ‘You fool me. You kill my friend. And then dare to show up!’

‘Haha.’ He laughed, spitting blood, ‘You still haven’t lost your punches, master.’

I was confused about who he was talking to, then I turned to Mar’Keth: ‘What is he talking about?’

‘Oh. I see, he doesn’t know.’ Ryo Bin said.

‘Well, Raim. He was my mentor, my master. Taught me everything I know.’

‘You are no faithful student. You are a mere physical manifestation of greed and jealousy.’ Mar’Keth said.

‘You trained under his wing? And dropped this low?’ I asked.

‘I build my guild. I helped people survive, THAT, is worth something.’ He said, crawling back to his feet. ‘But I am here, not to fight. I am a mercenary after all. I do what needs to be done, for the right price. And I am willing to smuggle you out of here right now if you are willing to pay up of course.’

I withdrew my blade: ‘I have no mon-’

I was interrupted by Mar’Keth throwing a bag of gold at Ryo Bin.

‘Follow me.’ He said.

‘Last time you said that, it didn’t end well for one of us.’ I said skeptically.

He chuckled and looked over his shoulder: ‘Do not worry Raim, I have no longer anything to gain from betraying your trust.’

We followed him, through dark alleyways. At all times, the urge to slice him in half was overwhelming. But, I managed to hold myself in.

Once we got to the destination, the smuggling ship was visible in the distance. But before we could get to it, a bunch of Ryo Bin’s men surrounded us.

‘They are with me, brothers. Let us through.’ Ryo Bin exclaimed, but none of them budged. He repeated himself, but yet again, no reaction.

Suddenly, one of them attacked us, and Mar’Keth punched him out of midair. The others followed, trying to kill us, but none of them succeeded: Ryo Bin took a weird-looking tool that was strapped to his trousers. He shook it and it unfolded into a bow. He then shot three of them at an immense speed. I drew my sword and sliced a couple more in one swing. Mar’Keth finally drew his sword, striking enemies with

great precision. The fight lasted mere seconds before all the assassins were taken out.

We checked that all of us remained unharmed. Then rushed out to the ship.

The wind was harsh, the sun was long gone, and the waters ahead were full of danger. But with these two on board, I wasn't afraid.

'What was your deal with the magistrate anyways?' I asked Ryo Bin.

He was looking into the distance at the restless waves ahead: 'Money.'

'That's it?' I asked annoyed.

'I was born as a nobleman's kid. Do you know how much depends on you as a nobleman? You have all the money you could ever want. You sit behind your very pretty desk and answer complaints. You think that I am willing to do that?' He explained. 'I wanted to work for my money. I wanted to travel overseas. So I behaved like a hooligan. Vandalized properties. I ran away from my parents.' A pause followed.

‘Then I found him.’ Mar’Keth added. ‘I trained him, raised him. I taught him how to defend himself. All of it, until he ran away from me one day, having ransacked my house.’

I looked back at Ryo Bin with disgust:
‘Monster.’

Ryo Bin chuckled: ‘Oh yes. Money is for the monsters. Then, has Mar’Keth told you about his ransacking during the war?’

I hadn’t expected to hear that. ‘Is that true?’ I asked Mar’Keth.

He looked down: ‘Yes. I was told so.’

‘Good soldiers follow orders.’ They said in unison.

‘So, killing Pumer then was an order too?’ I asked with anger.

‘No. My contract said to delay you, and only you. Your friend was of no particular use for us.’

I jumped at him, took out the dagger that was holstered in his boot, and put it against his throat: ‘HE WAS MY FRIEND!’ I yelled out.

I could feel my hand putting pressure on his throat, so much so that the first light cut appeared on his skin. His look did not change, it was as stone cold as prior. He didn't care about dying, he did only care about wealth.

I backed away from him, punching him with the hilt of the dagger.

‘Why did you help us?’ Mar’Keth asked.

‘Money at first. But now that I saw my men turn against me, there’s something more going on.’ He answered. ‘I’ll diverge paths once we arrive at the shore, but if you want to know where your precious magistrate went, he set sails to Valomor.’

High Valomor? Why did he want to go back there? He wasn't going to show off like a little kid. Was he trying to start a fight? Oh no, if he does, no one will be able to stop him, not with an astral. Certainly not other magistrates without one.

‘He’s trying to overthrow Valomor’s council...’ I mumbled. Then looked up at Mar’Keth.

‘Aradoth you say?’ Mar’Keth asked. ‘I recognize that name.’ He stopped for a moment.

‘When the war began,’ he started, ‘the Valomorians were the first to strike.’

The Valomorians? What was he on about? Valomorians had always kept peace.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘The magistrate hated the Vilgmeri for their scrutinizing actions against the Valomorians. The first attack happened at night, unexpectedly. They couldn’t get in straight away, because of the Four. They were interconnected by the Whisperers, which kept the Vilgmeri safe.’ He explained.

‘So what did they do?’ I asked.

‘Destroyed the Thur’ Four, creating a hole in the barrier, which allowed them to trespass on the Vilgmeri lands. From there, they diverged and attacked the city in the mountains, while the rest of them attacked the capital. It was a bloodbath. My battalion arrived two days later, answering the distress call from Vilgmeri.’

I was listening to every word he said with fear and anger.

‘The battle raged on for six days. When the resources were low, and our men tired, another wave of astral magicians came storming in, under the command of Aradoth. Luckily by then, the Vilgmeri managed to send out more soldiers to fight alongside us.’

‘Did you win?’ Ryo Bin asked.

‘Barely. We drove them away. Their magic is weaker outside Valomor. But now it seems they made a breakthrough. Ones like you, Raim.’ He said pointing at me.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘Astral weaponry.’ He said, ‘That’s their new weapon.’

‘The weapon to destroy all else that doesn’t commit to its bidding.’ I mumbled. ‘So... I was raised to be a machine? A machine for slaughter?’

‘I am afraid so.’ Mar’Keth responded.

So, all the talk about peace and isolation was lies. Aradoth wanted my astral, he wasn't going to bond with it, but he was willing to betray for it. He couldn't cope with defeat, so they discovered the astral weaponry, and all it takes now is to convince the students there that they are doing this for their good. Mindless killing machines. Oh, High Heavens...

'So, logically, his next step is to' I interrupted Mar'Keth.

'Kill the council, drive other magistrates into submission, and set out to Vilgmeri. Without the Four, they won't stand a chance.'

Mar'Keth nodded.

He's starting another war...

Chapter 12: Calm before the storm

When we arrived, the sun had risen above the horizon. It was the seventh hour. We got off the ship:

‘We have to get to the tavern as soon as possible. We can alert many more people there.’ I said.

‘Ryo Bin, you with us?’ Mar’Keth asked.

He took a moment to reply, looking at a device on his wrist: ‘No, I have other business here. Good luck to you.’

We both nodded and ran our separate ways. After some time, we finally reached the tavern. We could see Jo’Ori putting up the signs outside the tavern like he did every morning.

‘Jo’Ori!’ I yelled out to him.

He turned around, noticing us with a surprised face. ‘Hey, guys! Good to see you, how was your journey?’

‘Not good brother. If what I think is true, there will be another war. Valomor might repeat its past, but this time, come out victorious.’ I said.

He looked at me confused: ‘What are you talking about? And where is Pumer?’

Me and Mar’Keth looked at one another.

‘Jo’Ori... Pumer did not make it. He was killed.’

Jo’Ori’s eyes widened. I could see the tears in his eyes accumulating.

‘Pumer... is dead?’ He asked, his voice trembling.

‘Unfortunately so.’ I answered.

‘Who killed him?’ He asked with fists hardened.

‘I don’t know. The responsibility lies with Ryo Bin, the head of the Assassins Guild.’ I answered.

He fell to his knees: ‘He’s gone... He is no more...’ He looked at his hands.

‘Listen Jo’Ori, I understand your grief, but listen-’

‘Oh, do you!’ He screamed, attracting the attention of surrounding citizens. ‘Since when did you become the all-knower? You don’t know anything about loss! You only know how to take it! You come here, seeking shelter. And I offered, I gave, I overcame all the troubles that came with it. You just kept on taking, until there was nothing left, and the one time that someone invited you to go with them, you led them to their demise.’

Jo’Ori rushed to the tavern. I tried running after him, but Mar’Keth held me by my wrist.

‘No use. Let him grief. We have a greater mission to fulfill.’ He exclaimed.

He was right, as much as I wanted to comfort Jo’Ori, it was too late for tears. I had barely understood what happened, but I couldn’t dwell on those feelings.

‘The tavern opens soon. In the mornings it’s always full. That’s our best chance of delivering a message.’ I said.

‘I shall write a message to Gilded Juval’s head of military to be on the ready.’ He explained.

I nodded, and we split up. After an hour, the tavern filled up, everyone was drinking and having a good time. Vai was playing her music, and Jo'Ori was pouring drinks emotionlessly, the first time that he didn't speak to anyone.

Once all tables were full, I got up on the bar and started yelling: 'Attention! Please listen, this is important!'

No reaction. No one even bats an eye. Luckily, Jo'Ori shouted: 'HEY! Listen up.' Everyone looked in my direction. I looked down at Jo'Ori and nodded in approval.

'People, I have bad news. Years ago, Vilgmeri was forced into war, because of my homeland, High Valomor. Back then, the Four protected this place. But now, I am afraid that that will not be the case. One of the most powerful people there has gained an otherworldly being, a being beyond our understanding. It simply cannot be destroyed.' I paused. Everyone was looking at me confused. 'I ask you people, whoever you are, to shelter yourself from what is about to happen. It is recommended that you flee to

Grace of Ami, it's the closest city, and it is less likely to be targeted.'

When I finished, no one moved a muscle. There was an unsettling silence that dominated the room. Eventually, one of them got up:

'I do not like you, zuthrs. But it is my kingdom you speak of. I will fight for it!' They exclaimed.

Another one got up: 'I am Estri, the head of the military office of Vilgmeri. If what you say is true, we are in danger. I am going to inform the office immediately. Do you have proof I can show them?' He asked.

'I am the proof, sir.' I answered.

I got off and looked at Jo'Ori, he was not smiling, like I could blame him.

'Jo'Ori listen-'

'You have my support. If you need shelter, the tavern has open doors. Now get out of my sight.' He interrupted me.

I was speechless. But I respected his decision. I nodded in agreement and went away.

Later that day I met up with Mar'keth. We didn't know what to do now. It was a matter of time before they'd come here.

‘Do we have a clear plan of action?’ I asked him.

He looked around, then down at the ground: ‘We fight.’

Simple as that. Just fight, but people here don't need to fight. The scrutinization Valomor faced was not because of them, but because of the government.

‘it's not their fight. Why must there be bloodshed? They don't deserve this.’ I said,

‘Why do you care Raim?’ He asked. ‘It's not like this is your fight either.’

‘This is the only place I've ever felt at home. I had to fill big shoes at home. Ones I didn't want to fill, and one I was bound by for eternity. But I chose to divert from it.’ I explained. ‘Why do you fight? This is not your homeland either.’

‘I fight because that's what I know best. I've never been taught anything else. The thing I

knew best after my years of training, was to kill a person.' He said.

I had never thought about him that way. The horrors he must've faced when he served in the military.

'You think we can win?' I asked him.

He smiled: 'Do we have any other choice?'

The first time I saw him smile. I doubt we can beat the magistrate with an army of astral warriors and magicians.

I noticed Vai walking out of the tavern. She was looking around and finally noticed us two sitting down. That's when she walked over to us.

'Gentlemen.' She greeted us.

'Hello Vai.' I answered.

'Good day.' Mar'Keth said.

She sat down across us: 'So... A war huh?'

I nodded. 'Sadly, yes.'

'I am no real fighter, but I can help.' She said.

I looked at her intrigued.

‘I worked a lot with the sorcerers. I have been taught ways to predict the future. It’s not a distant future, but it’s something. If you let me meditate in silence, I might be able to surpass my ability to tell the future, and extend the time frame.’ She said.

I never knew she could tell the future. Has she just not been using her ability? Either way, it was a big plus having her on our side. I was happy she left Valomor too, nice having families close by.

‘You can meditate where Mar’Keth trained me. That’s about as quiet and serene as it gets.’ I told her.

‘I will lead you there.’ Mar’Keth added.

She nodded and went with him. This was getting intense. If she manages to find anything out, then we might be able to change the outcome. I cannot let these people die. I have to get in contact with Zo Rei Wu, he might be able to teleport people out of here to keep them out of danger. We can’t take any chances.

Chapter 13: Last Stand

‘What did you see?’ I asked Vai.

‘Chaos. Land overrun by chaos. I couldn’t make out what was going on.’ She answered. ‘I saw a lot of people dying. Both Valomorians and Vilgmeri.’

It would seem that she couldn’t seem to determine the outcome of the war, but I didn’t blame her. Fortunetelling is tough, and something I could never grasp. I guess, the best we can do is prepare for the worst, and hope for a good outcome.

‘There... is another thing I have to tell you.’ She said with a sad tone. ‘You were there...’

‘Well yes of course! I’m not planning on quitting now.’ I said.

‘Dead.’ She finished.

I kept looking at her. She eventually looked down to avoid my gaze, and I froze. So, this is

where it ends? This war is my downfall? Well, I have to accept this, there is no way to avoid it, but if my death results in a win for the Vilgmeri, it might be worth it after all.

‘So be it.’ I answered Vai. ‘I’d be dying for my home.’

She looked at me with teared-up eyes. ‘But... I don’t want you to die. There has to be a way to avoid it.’ She said.

‘No Vai. The ironic thing is, the more we try to avoid it, the more we expedite the process to achieving said end.’ I answered.

Vai started crying. Mar’Keth sat beside her drinking beer. He didn’t seem too moved by her words.

‘And you Mar? Are you not afraid?’ I asked him.

‘No.’ He answered.

‘Not afraid of death?’

‘I’ve got nothing to lose.’ He said and took a sip of his beer. ‘I’ve seen my best men die for a goal that was out of our reach. Death by command of the higher-ups. You think this war is new to me?’

He raised his eyebrows, but I couldn't say anything back. I had no experience in grand battles. I was a mere duelist, and my dueling skills can only get me so far. And as Mar has taught me, no one fights fair, so I cannot depend on my morals.

'Vai, how long till they invade?' I asked.

She wiped her tears and looked up at me: 'I don't know for sure. I saw ships moving up, it was the middle of the night. It takes the ships around four days to get here. If we take into account that they want to arrive here as soon as possible, then they might get here in three days at best.' She explained.

'In other words, tomorrow.' Mar'Keth said.

We need to be ready by tomorrow. That's too little time and so much preparation.

'Who of you is Raim?' I heard someone ask behind me. I turned around and answered.

'May I have a word with you?' He asked.

'Sure.' I said and went to him. He was wearing a green manteau and a hat that represented the

Vilgmeri military force, which made me think that he was an officer.

‘What may I owe to this visit?’ I asked politely.

‘Raim, I was informed by the head of the military office that you warned us of an approaching threat.’ He said, and I nodded.

‘As I have been told, said threat is of your origin.’ I yet again agreed.

‘They have been using our kin to breed a new threat for the outside. Ones like me possess weapons beyond our physical realm. If they attack in masses, then I am afraid that we do not stand a chance in hand-to-hand combat.’ I explained.

The officer nodded his head: ‘I understand. But we wouldn’t be the kingdom of technology if we didn’t have weapons of our own.’

I smiled in relief. If they had an answer, then we might not be doomed after all.

The officer brought me to their training grounds, where we went deeper into the underground

facility, where he showed me the colossal machinery.

‘This, is our answer. The Titans.’ He said. ‘They are powered with energized cells from the inside, which are further reinforced with some kind of an enchantment.’

‘Enchantment?’ I asked.

‘Enkrodi Alma, the enchantment of iron... I think.’ I heard someone say. When I looked in that direction, I saw a familiar face, and a wave of happiness hit me.

‘Wu!’ I said rushing to him for a hug.

‘Glad to see you again.’ He said.

‘Same here. I... I’m sorry for...’

‘I know. So am I. But it wasn’t your fault. If I hadn’t told you to step off at Gilded Juval, he’d be alive right now. Though, whether he’d like to see everything go down like this, I do not know.’ He said.

I nodded. ‘How’d you enchant their cells?’

He looked at the cells, then back at me: ‘I don’t know. But it worked.’

I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t expect that kind of an answer. But this was better than nothing.

‘Raim, I have something to ask you.’ Wu said.

‘Yes Wu, how may I help?’ I asked.

‘Follow me.’ He said, sprinkling something in the air and creating a portal.

‘Is this safe?’ I asked him.

‘Maybe.’ He answered.

I looked at him with a skeptical face.

‘Okay, okay sorry. It’s safe, come on through.’

I followed him through the portal. We came out on top of a tower. It was extremely high up, I could see all of Vilgmeri from up here. Then I realized, we were on one of the Four.

‘Wow!’ I said amazed.

‘Beautiful view isn’t it?’

‘Yes. But why are we here?’ I asked.

Wu pointed in the direction of the broken Four: ‘You see that one? That’s their point of entrance. You see, I studied these towers, and it appears that the others are in a working order. If I can repair the broken link, they should become whole again.’

My eyes widened: ‘Can you do that?’

He shook his head: ‘I need more time. I’ve read up on the Whisperers, and it seems that they used the same magic we do in Ervenia.’

‘Is it possible to learn this power?’ I asked.

‘Not by a regular magician. Good thing that I’m the best.’ He said with a smile.

After returning to the tavern, I had my dinner and went to sleep. It was going to be a long day tomorrow.

Once I woke up, I grabbed my clothes and went out to the bazaar. It was weird not seeing anyone here. This place would usually be flooded with hard-working shopkeepers and salesmen. The silence was almost overwhelming. I ran further down to where Mar’Keth and Vai were preparing.

‘Any news?’ I asked.

‘Peaceful morning to you too, Raim. No, no news.’ Mar replied.

‘I have trouble focusing, but one of the scouts did report movement overseas, in our direction.’ Vai said.

‘Did they see who it was?’ I asked.

‘Posh-dressed old people and some young apprentices. They are ours Raim.’ She said worried.

So it is true. This is what it has come to. Death and destruction. I should inform the officers, that the battle is imminent.

It was late evening by the time we got everything set up. I helped Jo’Ori extract the citizens. Only the soldiers, me, and Mar’Keth were left. The scouts had reported that the fleet of a couple dozen ships was headed our way. Knowing our ships, each could easily fit roughly two hundred men. This was going to be a bloodbath.

I looked at my time teller, the hour had struck eleven. It was time.

After a while, we could hear horns in the distance. Looking from the docks, I could see the ships approaching with lit torches. And to think, people on there were my friends and partners. Eye for an eye.

The walls of Vilgmeri had mounted ballistas on them. This would slow down their approach. The frontline was settled with tower shields, and we were the second line of defense.

And finally, the first catapult fired its shot. It grazed one of the ships. They started shooting with cannons back at us, destroying some of our frontlines. The second shot from the catapult broke one of the ships in half, sinking it. Then, they finally reached the land.

Students stormed from the shore, attacking our soldiers. I could see many dying, from both our side and that of Valomor. However, it didn't take them long before they broke through our first line. We were up next...

I took a deep breath and stood behind the gate that led to the capital. I couldn't see anything, all I heard was ballista firing, and soldiers screaming and saw the gate being attacked. I looked to my right, to see Mar'Keth standing ready with a sword in his hands. Upon further inspection, I noticed his flail strapped to his side, with a shield on his back. He looked at me and nodded, I did the same.

The gate broke into pieces. The Valomorians stormed in, the astral fighters head first, accompanied by the magicians behind them, and the magistrate in the back.

I unsheathed my blade and threw it at the enemy, piercing through multiple at once. Recalling it and striking with my bare fist, then recasting at the nearest enemy. I turned around and blocked the incoming astral attack, repelling it and sweeping their feet, striking them once they were on the ground. Mar'Keth followed up with multiple swift strikes against some of them. I saw him parry an attack and then grab another's sword and throw it away. He was an immovable object, I watched his back, as he did mine. Eventually, we got to the second layer of

enemies where the magic casters were. Killing them was no problem, as they couldn't fight back in close combat. But then, me and Mar'Keth got pushed back by an immense force. Looking back ahead of us, it was Aradoth, with the other magistrate around him. The magistrate started charging us, leaving Aradoth behind.

'You go help others, I'll hold them back.'

Mar'Keth said, pushing me aside and throwing his sword away. He then took out his flail and the shield from his back and closed his eyes. After a moment, an eye on the back of his head opened, which looked different than his other eyes. It looked like that of a snake. I then noticed that his shield and flail had become golden. He then rushed in, hitting one of the magistrates at an immense speed, throwing him back, another tried attacking him but his eye notified him of it, and he blocked it with his shield. From the looks of it, the magistrate that hit his shield stumbled backward, and the magistrate hit by the flail didn't seem to be getting up. I figured he'd have this under control and ran towards the other soldiers.

The battle raged on with no end in sight. They kept flooding the gates like there was no end to them. I had helped many soldiers, saved a bunch of them from death, and killed dozens more Valomorians. I saw the Titans in the distance demolishing the students. The magistrates were still busy with Mar’Keth and the ballistas were still firing.

I felt someone behind me, and quickly turned around, only to see a student fall over and die, noticing two arrows in his back. Looking further back, I could see Ryo Bin fending off some of the students himself.

I ran towards the gate, and it was then that I noticed Jo’Ori in the distance, fighting against the enemy. He was covered in blood with a sword in hand. He was striking enemies, but it looked like he had gotten a good bunch of punches.

‘Idiot!’ I yelled and rushed to him.

When I arrived, he was about to get sliced by an astral sword, but I blocked it, deflecting it and redirecting the attack back, killing the enemy.

‘Next time fight with us, not alone.’ I said reaching out my hand to him.

He grabbed it and stood up: ‘Thank you.’

‘I will separate them from Aradoth.’ I yelled at him.

‘Why? You can’t fight them alone!’ Jo’Ori exclaimed.

‘I may not, but I have to try.’ I said and ran away.

I ran along the wall, scouting out the enemy positions. Aradoth was in the back. It would’ve been the perfect opportunity to distract him, but then I saw him move up, absolutely demolishing the competition. With a swift move of his hand, he swept the shields off their feet. Mar’Keth, who at this point had killed the other magistrate, charged in for an attack, but with just a hand gesture was pushed back. When he regained his footing, Aradoth lifted him and bashed him against the wall a couple of times. Mar’Keth was heavily bleeding, and that’s when I lunged my sword at Aradoth. He slightly moved his head to avoid it and looked in my direction.

‘I got you now’ I thought to myself, and I recalled my sword, but alas he just grabbed it and threw it back at me, hitting me in my shoulder.

I dropped to the ground. I could barely feel my shoulder anymore, but I fought the pain and managed to get up. Aradoth came closer.

‘Pathetic. And to think astral chose you. How amusing.’ He said gripping his hand into a fist.

I felt immense pressure around me. I got lifted and thrown against a wall. I could barely lift my head. I didn’t have the strength to snap my fingers, and looking at my hand, I saw my blood on it.

‘Worthless!’ Aradoth said picking me up and slamming me into the ground.

I lay there with my eyes barely open, and all I could see was Aradoth standing over me. He lifted his hand and was about to crush me. This was it, Vai predicted it correctly, she is the best sorcerer to ever exist, well-done gal.

Aradoth was throwing his hand down but then got shot in the back with an arrow. It hurt him enough to stop him.

After that, he got struck by Mar’Keth’s flail, which sent him flying back. Mar then picked me up, and with the might I still had left, I unsheathed my blade, thrusting it through Aradoth’s chest.

He fell to his knees and started bleeding. I walked up to him, but the moment I tried touching him, I got flung back, and I couldn’t reach the astral inside.

‘Aagh!’ I yelled out.

Aradoth laughed: ‘Oh boy, please. You cannot handle this power!.’

He grabbed my sword and broke its handle off and slowly got up. I couldn’t believe my eyes, he had broken the sword. He then jumped at me, I was too weak to block it, but Mar’Keth jumped in front of me with his shield equipped to block the blow, Aradoth’s punch broke right through Mar’Keth’s shield, sending him flying back.

It was then that some bright purple light illuminated the skies. Everyone's attention was directed to it. It was astonishing, something from dreams, never seen before. Then, purple lights converged into one point and flew into the broken Four, reconstructing it.

‘Wu...’ I mumbled.

The Four repaired itself like it was never broken. After a moment, a purple figure appeared on top of the tower, lighting a flame on the chalice. Afterward, lights chained from one Four to the others, reconnecting them. Wu had restored the Four.

Once all of them were lit, they focused on Aradoth, directing their power to him. Aradoth started screaming in agony. He started bleeding from his eyes, knocking him back to his knees. After a moment, a purple figure got dragged out of him, the astral. I slowly approached it, reaching my hand out, to which the astral responded and made its way back into my body.

I felt a surge of power running through me. Finally, reunited.

I walked up to Aradoth who was on his knees still.

‘This means nothing boy! It is just a mere setback. YOU ARE WORTHLESS! THERE IS NO FUTURE FOR YOU!’

I moved closer to him: ‘In that case, there is no future for either of us.’ I said, snapping my blade back into existence and slicing Aradoth’s head right off, which fell and rolled a little further.

I felt relieved. He was finally gone. Then I remembered that Mar’Keth was still lying on the ground, so I rushed to him.

‘Hey, hey, Mar’Keth! How are you?’ I lifted his head, placing it onto my legs.

‘Raim?’ He said while spitting blood into my face.

‘Yes, Mar, it’s me. Stay with me, hold a little longer, we won. We’ll get you patched up in no time.’ I said crying.

‘We won?’ He smiled, ‘One more victory.’

He was coughing blood. It didn't take him long to close his eyes and halt his breathing.

Mar'Keth was gone.

We walked out to the front of the gates, looking over the battlefield and its corpses.

'HALT!' I yelled in my lungs. 'Your leader is dead!' I said lifting his decapitated head.

'You have nothing left to fight for! Go home, live your life! Stop this bloodshed!'

Everyone halted their fighting. Everyone was exhausted. I could see the sun rising over the horizon, giving color to all the dead soldiers and students alike. So many lost, for what? Power? Greed? Revenge?

The students outside the gates moved back into their ships, those who were inside, either died in the battle or got annihilated by the Four. They sailed back to Valomor.

Ryo Bin came standing next to me: 'So, that's a victory!' Said in a cheerful tone.

I looked at him distraught, erasing his smile instantly.

‘It’s not a victory. It’s war, and in war no one is victorious. But how did you learn again? Good soldiers follow orders? Well? What good have those orders done?’ I asked him in a mild tone.

He froze with an open mouth but couldn’t get a word out. I then moved back into the city to help the wounded.

The day dawned, and hope for Vilgmeri reignited once again. This time, in a different light, hopefully.

Epilogue:

Once every soldier got their deserved burial, we rebuilt the city from the ground up. We decorated it and opened our harbors for more trade. People changed, abolished their nationalistic beliefs, and started being friendly towards outsiders.

Pumer's body was retrieved by Ryo Bin's men. He got a ceremonial burial together with Mar'Keth. Commemorated for their devotion to their duty, and friendship.

Vai continued living here and working as the bard. She made enough money to move out of the tavern and live on her own.

Jo'Ori still hates Ryo Bin. To this day, he still isn't welcome in the tavern.

Zo Rei Wu earned a promotion here in R'Oth Vilgmeri, being appraised as the new Whisperer of Vilgmeri.

And I, well, I started traveling again. But from time to time I return to this place, meeting my friends and catching up with them.

And it so happened that you traveler, met me at this time! How convenient eh?

Anyway, I need to head out, adventure is waiting. If you'd like to know more about these lands, visit our library, where Wu resides. Oh, he still has grotl's enchanted by the way.

Good luck traveler! And who knows, may our paths cross again!