



Tales of Amalon: Astral Throne

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Prologue:

After the successful defense against the Valomorian invaders, the Vilgmeri were left to rebuild what was destroyed. Many people died, fighting a battle that wasn't meant for them. Aradoth was killed by Raim with his friends' help, however, they suffered casualties as well. Pumer died by an assassin's hand, and Mar'Keth died while valiantly protecting Raim from Aradoth. Both Pumer and Mar'Keth were buried in the same graveyard.

Ten years later, Raim has still yet to gather the needed courage to go visit their graves. Jo'Ori has continued running his tavern, and Ryo Bin his guild. Vai, on the other hand, has a complete makeover, as Raim one day decides to pass on the Astral 'Mela', to Vai instead. Having accepted the responsibilities that came with possessing an Astral, Vai dedicated all her time to studying the arts of astral. She still sang in the tavern in the evenings, and many gathered to hear her majestic voice.

Two years later, Vai has accumulated the power and knowledge she needs to accomplish her next

goal: find the Astral Throne, an apparition in her visions, which she can't seem to figure out why it keeps on appearing. As they say, some things are better kept secret, but what will she undertake to unlock those secrets?

Chapter 1: Ball form

The sun shone through the window, illuminating the dust that covered the windowsill. The early mornings in Vilgmeri were beautiful, unlike the R'Oth Vilgmeri itself, the serenity was amazing. Even in Valomor, this is a rare view.

A muffled noise came from my right, where Ihre was sitting. I sighed: 'Fine.' I stood up from my chair and went over to him, where I had him tied to a chair and covered his mouth with cloth. Upon removing it, he spoke: 'I'm so sorry, Miss Vai! I swear to my existence, that I will not steal again! Please!' Tears flooded from his eyes.

'I don't know Ihre, that's what you said last time too, now look at you. It really didn't have to come down to this.' I replied.

'No! No, please! I have kids, I have a family that needs me to provide for them. You have to understand, those stolen weapons were of good value, me and my family aren't doing well financially, I had to do something about it.' He pleaded.

‘I’m sure you had your reasons. With no bad intent, no doubt. But unfortunately, it so happened that I caught you before anyone else. Whether that’s a relief is up to you to decide. But worry not, I will let your family know that you have passed.’ I reassured him, or well, what I hoped to be reassuring, but ended up stressing him out even more.

‘No, no, no, no, n-’ He said as I formed a ball of astral magic in my hands and threw it at him, splitting his head in half.

‘Not my worries Ihre. I warned you. Goodbye, old friend.’ I said before grabbing my robe and moving out of his house. Once I got outside, the sun blinded me. People were moving back and forth, and the morning market kept the square busy, with enough people to get lost in.

‘Any witnesses?’ I asked Mela.

‘None.’ It replied.

Perfect. Now to get back to the tavern. I walked down the main road, leading to the split, where many merchants traded foods. I walked up to

one of the stands where Ymyla sold boldflower lemonades.

‘Well, well, who do we have here? Dear Vai!’ She said as I approached. I always loved her positivity, it made for an enjoyable experience.

‘Nothing much. It’s hot outside, thought to come by and get something refreshing.’ I said.

‘But of course! Boldflower lemonade as per usual?’ She asked, to which I nodded yes. She proceeded to pour me a cup of fresh lemonade, I paid her three Wisps and took a big gulp.

‘Did you hear about the trade conflicts? The High Valomorians are stopping the trade with the Vilgmeri temporarily.’ Ymyla informed me.

‘Doesn’t surprise me, after what they tried.’ I replied.

Ymyla raised her eyebrows: ‘That was twelve years ago Vai! I think it’s time that we leave what was, in the past. These are just childish games.’

I wasn’t convinced. Valomorians deserved the backlash they received. People had died, for no

reason. All that could have been avoided, but no, always act first, then ask questions. Quite ironic for a kingdom that promotes reflection and resolve.

‘Maybe, but the lost lives cannot be reattained. They are gone forever, and unlike the trade, cannot come back. If anything, they are harming themselves, they’ll go crawling back to Vilgmeri soon enough. Anyways, I have to get going, nice chatting with you Ymyla!’ I told her as I waved her goodbye.

On my way to the tavern, I saw a bunch of street performers doing tricks and acrobatics. Some orna were involved as well, and always adored them. Such incredible creatures, but never understood their behavior.

Eventually, I arrived at the tavern, and not even a moment after entering the room, I felt the judgmental look coming from Jo’Ori. I moved to an empty seat at the bar, where he came to serve me.

‘Hungry?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Twintail snacks please.’ I replied.

He turned back to the large shelves, where he kept some dried snacks. He reached for a glass bowl and poured some in.

‘Anything you want to tell me?’ He suddenly asked.

I took a piece of meat and started chewing it: ‘No. Why?’

‘Ihre always visits me in the morning. For the past eight years this has been the case, but today he suddenly didn’t appear. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about it, would you?’ He asked passive-aggressively.

I shook my head: ‘No. I barely get to see him at all lately.’

‘Even after he stole the weapons from the safe and supposedly sold them? I clearly remember you being very upset.’ He insinuated.

‘What are you trying to say, Jo’Ori?’ I asked directly.

‘Look Vai, I understand that you want to help. But I think you might be overdoing it. You are going too far. I didn’t care much for Ihre, but

what if that happened to someone close to us? What then?’ He questioned.

‘Like Pumer?’ I returned the question.

The look on Jo’Ori’s face changed in an instant: ‘Don’t you dare to bring him into this conversation, Vai!’

‘Why? He constantly stole! Yet you kept on letting him get away with it. Time and time again, I wondered why you never kicked him out. Come to think of it, he deserved the same treatment as Ihre.’ I said, and shortly after felt his hand moving in for a slap, but I raised my arm and blocked it.

‘Really?’ I said, continuing to eat my food.

‘You are reckless. You hold no emotion, no thought nor empathy. You have lost your humanity upon gaining the Astral. You are in no condition to put it to good use. Feel like a god? Feel like you can do anything?’ Jo’Ori whispered aggressively.

‘Yes, and to be honest, I don’t see anyone stopping me from using my powers to my heart’s

content. Raim gave it to me for a reason.' I exclaimed.

'Yes, and I wish he had never given it in the first place.' He said with an angry face, moving to the next customer.

Chapter 2: Spear form

Today was dull. Nothing had happened, and I didn't feel like training, at least not alone. Thus, I thought about looking for Raim and seeing what he was up to. So, I left the tavern after having my morning breakfast with Jo'Ori and went straight to the Fishbanks. If Raim was nowhere to be found, that was the place to search.

After fifteen minutes of walking, I finally arrived at my destination. Further left behind the tree line was an open field. Once I approached closer, grunts were to be heard from behind the trees. Once I passed them, the field was revealed with Raim in it, training. I got closer and leaned against one of the trees.

Raim was practicing the sword arts, specifically the windcutter stance, where he uses his swift movements to grab the attention of his opponent, and then catch them off guard, by using his sword.

He twirled and threw his sword forward, while kicking the air, followed by two punches and a shove, which chained into a leg sweep and a recall of the sword, into the ground. Classic duelist's move. Very elegant, very predictable, yet it magically works all the time. The amount of times duelists have won Almari duels just by performing that move is borderline amazing. Nonetheless, if you get caught in the middle of your attacks, you are a goner. Instantly swiped off your feet, easy defeat.

After finishing the move, he went over to the tables to grab a drink.

‘Getting back in shape?’ I asked.

Raim looked behind him, noticing me, and then back at his glass: ‘I miss the training. The duels more so, kept me in the rhythm. Now I can barely perform the windcutter stance without running out of breath.’

‘You haven’t fought for over a decade, you’ll need some practice to get back in shape.’ I said.

‘Up for a challenge?’ He asked.

‘Challenge? I’ll knock you right out.’ I replied.

He grinned and invited me to the center of the field, where he was training. ‘How do you want to start? Nostalgic vibes?’ He asked while taking a piece of cloth out of his pocket.

‘Sure.’ I answered.

Raim stood in front of me, about three meters away. He lifted the cloth and said: ‘Welcome to an Almari duel. The weapon of choice has been liberated, seeing as my opponent isn’t a duelist.’

I rolled my eyes while smirking. He then continued: ‘The rules are classic: once the cloth hits the ground, the competitors may strike one another, and the fighting continues until one of the two falls to the ground, first to three points.’

I readied myself. ‘Are you ready?’ Raim asked, to which I nodded. After a moment, he dropped the cloth, indicating the start of the duel.

I rushed towards him, striking him with a punch. The hit was successful, forcing him to recoil and retreat. I followed relentlessly, throwing punches one after another, however, none of them landed, as Raim kept dodging every single one. He then immediately punched me in the cheek, throwing

me off, and forcing my eye off of him. Once I turned around to look at his last location, he wasn't there anymore, it was then that I heard my Astral whisper 'right', thus I immediately turned right and blocked the incoming attack. I thought it'd work out, but he just retracted his arm, and threw a kick at my cheek, which sent me off balance, and face-first into the ground.

'Round one goes to me.' He exclaimed.

As much as I loved training with him, I just couldn't stand losing. It always hurt me, even if it had no meaning, losing meant being weak, and I was never about being weak, always as strong as possible.

Round two started, and immediately the sword flew towards me. I used my astral powers to blow it away and send it off course. This gave Raim enough time to close the distance and jump in for a strike. I blocked it successfully and shoved him away. He then retreated and got into a windcutter stance. 'Seriously?' I thought to myself, after which I formed a bolt in my hands, sending it in his direction. He dodged it with ease, even though the bolt was relatively fast.

Nevertheless, I didn't give up, and kept on recasting the spear form, in hopes of catching him off guard, which I then would abuse and cast ball form instead, knocking him off his feet easily. However, instead of backing off, he came closer, confusing me. I cast the ball form, hoping to hit him, but it's as if he knew exactly what I was planning on doing. He dodged it and went in for a kick. Predictable, a kick, followed by punches, I have you here Raim, just sweep you as you're kicking, you're making it too easy.

Raim twirled to kick, and I ducked, but he stopped his kick midway through, twirling back and punching me downwards instead.

'Round two goes to me.' He said after.

'Yeah. You got me, that's enough from my part.' I replied, a little annoyed.

'What? But the duel isn't done.' He exclaimed.

'I don't care. I surrender.' I said.

'Annoyed that I managed to swipe you off your feet even with barely any practice?' He said while chuckling.

‘You are lucky I’m holding myself back.’ I exclaimed. ‘You stand no chance against me if I were to use my full power.’

His expression changed from amused to annoyed: ‘Much like Ihre, I’m willing to bet.’

That caught me off guard: ‘What? How-’

‘How do I know? Jo’Ori told me. His body had to get cleaned up by the military, covered in black cloth to conceal the gruesomeness. What did that man ever do to you?’ He asked angrily.

‘He deserved-’ I got cut off again.

‘Deserved? Don’t you even start with that! Who are you to decide what that man deserved? He was a hardworking man, providing for his family. What allows you to decide what happens to him? Are you well-versed in that kind of stuff? I sure am not, nor is Jo’Ori, nor are you. Criminals deserve a fair trial, and not immediate death.’ He yelled.

I became angrier: ‘If the wrongdoers don’t get punished, they’ll do it again, and others will follow. No lessons will be learned, you want that?’

‘And what lesson did you learn? What did killing that man teach you? That the Vilgmeri are very susceptible to astral magic? Especially when they’re defenseless?’ He asked aggressively.

The emotions within me were boiling, and almost as if something had taken over me, I formed a purple rune in my hands and cast it toward Raim. He didn’t even turn around, his sword deflected it away.

‘I gave you that Astral because I had had enough of fighting and bloodshed. I lost good men on the battlefield, good friends. They didn’t deserve to die. Clear your mind, and rethink your acting process, Vai, don’t make me regret it.’ He said.

‘You think you scare me, Raim? You can’t do anything against me!’ I screamed at him.

As I finished my sentence, I noticed that his astral blade was at my throat, just centimeters away. Raim then turned around and moved over to me, closer to my face: ‘Try me.’

His look was sinister, the stare was enough to make a dead man cry.

‘You may not be mortal, but you still feel pain, Vai. I can attest to that.’ He said, snapping the blade out of existence. ‘Clear your mind. We’ll talk later. I need to go to the tavern, Jo’Ori is organizing a drinking game tonight, can’t miss that. Mar’Keth would have loved it. I’ll drink to your name, brother.’

He took his shirt, and coat and started moving towards the exposed Fishbanks, as I was left alone to ponder on my actions.

Chapter 3: We who remain

After an hour of walking from the center of Grace of Ami, we finally arrived at the graveyard. It was located on a hill, further up from the southern part of the city. The graveyard was run by the government, but the local gravediggers took care of the place. It looked beautiful for a place that was supposed to impose grief and sadness.

From the gates, we walked further up and took the first turn right, then left, and stopped at the first grave to the left.

Jo'Ori went up to it and placed the bouquet of Aenari flowers that he had bought at the botanist earlier. They were a pretty violet color with a good scent too.

‘Hey there, brother!’ He said. ‘Long time no see huh? About... a year I think? How have you been holding up? Been a cold year so far. The summer sun just doesn’t warm me up as much. Clients have steadily declined as well.’

He took a long pause, making sure that all the flowers were laid out perfectly. He then lit five candles that were placed around the grave. I noticed him crying while doing that.

‘You know, sometimes... I just wish to see you come into the tavern again... Funny, caught myself yesterday pouring a mug of Mildegrad Stout, your favorite. The mug has still been sitting there on the bar.’ Jo’Ori’s voice started to break up from crying. ‘I just wish, one more drink... one more toast... with you man... Just one more stupid joke of yours, you bastard. I hated them so much but took them for granted. WHERE ARE THEY NOW?’ He let out a scream while crying.

He was sitting on his knees, tears falling onto the grass. The mist that had set in made it difficult to make out our surroundings, but Jo’Ori hadn’t noticed.

‘You remember our bard? Haha, big girl now! Has lots of responsibilities. Raim? Well, he retired his fighting long ago. Now he just hangs out with me and goes fishing from time to time. I’m the same I was... twel- DAMN YOU!

Twelve years ago. I miss you, man. Sometimes, I subconsciously knock on your door upstairs in the tavern and await a response, you let me in. Never to come. It just feels empty man. I miss you, brother.'

I looked over at the grave to the left of Pumer's, where Mar'Keth was buried. There was a notable difference in the amount of flowers and candles. All the flowers had died out, and the candles could burn no more.

'What's up with Mar'Keth's grave? Why is it so barren?' I asked.

Jo'Ori wiped his tears, looking over to his left: 'Raim hasn't visited Mar's grave ever since the burial. I am the only one who comes to visit both and lay some flowers. The gravediggers do their best to keep this place in shape, putting in immense effort.'

'Why doesn't he?' I asked further.

Jo'Ori stood up and went over to Mar'Keth's grave, getting rid of the dead flowers, and replacing them with new ones: 'It's difficult for him. Raim hasn't been the same after Pumer's

death. He blames himself, and Mar? Mar especially. He saved Raim's life and gave his life to defend Vilgmeri. They fought side by side and were friends. It's a tough thing to imagine that the only thing separating you and your close ones, is a layer of dirt and wood underneath.'

I wasn't close to either one of them, so I wasn't affected by their passing. However, it held a place in my mind, always wondering, what if they were to come back? I can make that happen, Mela told me that it's easily possible. But, why didn't they do that when Raim still had the Astral? Didn't he have the same abilities as I do? What morality is bound to this? Honor? I never understood.

'Vai?' I heard my name being called.

'Yes?' I replied.

'I said that I'll be checking out my parent's graves, I'll be back soon.' He said.

'Yeah, take your time.' I answered.

Once he left, I asked Mela: 'Does it take much to resurrect a person?'

‘For me, it's just a matter of reaching out and bringing back their soul. For you, a matter of strength of your soul.’ Mela replied.

‘Could I do that?’ I asked yet again.

‘With your soul’s strength, yes.’ Mela said.

‘Perfect. But, if I revive them, I’d have to dig the grave out first, which is inhumane and considered vandalism. Can I first just speak to... let’s say Pumer’s soul?’ I questioned.

‘As you wish.’ Mela said, after which I felt like I was in a trans. All around me became dense and dark. It was like being under a night sky, with all the stars burned out. Suddenly, a human shape appeared in front of me.

‘Vai?’ I heard them say, ‘Is that you?’

‘Pumer? Yes, it is I! Vai.’ I answered.

‘What’s up? I feel like I’ve slept for eight days straight.’ He said.

‘Slept?’ I asked rhetorically. ‘What do you mean slept?’

Pumer looked at me confused: ‘Why are you acting so weirdly?’

‘Pumer, you are dead.’ I said.

He became silent. For a moment he was taken aback, as if he didn’t understand what I had just said.

‘I am... dead? Is that why I couldn’t move? Why does it feel so... dense? Who? What? WHY?’
He started screaming.

‘Mela, why is he so delirious?’ I asked worried as Pumer started hyperventilating.

‘A dead soul does not know that it is dead. They cannot comprehend death, as they are disconnected from their body. For them, their memory ends at what they saw last.’ Mela replied.

‘Last? Oh right! Pumer! Look, I know you might be confused, but some people will want to see you again! Like Jo’Ori? Or Raim?’ I told him.

‘Ra... Raim? RAIM? I DIED! LAST I SAW HIM, I DIED! THAT’S THE LAST THING I

REMEMBER. THAT TRAITOR! HE LEFT ME TO DIE!’ Pumer yelled angrily.

‘Wha- NO! Pumer no you are delirious, you don’t get it, just calm down.’ I tried calming him down, but it just didn’t work.

‘This soul feels pain but has no physical body to help him cope. He cannot deal with this. Because of this, he also cannot filter his mind and speak as he thinks. I suggest that we return him to peace.’ Mela suggested.

I looked at Pumer with a frown: ‘I’m sorry.’

In an instant, everything went back to normal and I regained my vision. Moments after, I heard the footsteps of Jo’Ori to my right: ‘So? Ready to head back to the center? Buy some food for the road.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ I replied, moving over to him and exiting through the gates.

Hours later, we were sitting on the carriage that went straight to the capital. The encounter with Pumer had left me speechless. It left me in a deep thought, what is a human? And are my ways of judging people as fair as I had

calculated? Is it really possible to determine someone's being, by looking in between good and bad? Jo'Ori did it with Pumer, Raim did it with Mar'Keth. So why can't I? Then again, if I don't judge by actions, then what is there to judge at all?

'Jo.' I called out.

'Yes, Vai?' He replied.

'How can I better my judgment?'

Jo'Ori took a long moment before answering: 'Vai you can't judge people. Nobody appointed you as a judge or an executioner. ESPECIALLY as an executioner. You are in no possession of human life. You have no right to decide what happens to someone. That's why prisons exist. Everyone makes mistakes, and everyone deserves another chance to become better.'

'So, you hold no grudge against me?' I questioned.

Jo'Ori smiled: 'No, Vai. I could never. You came here when you were fifteen, now you are twenty-seven. I've known you for twelve years,

I can't hold a grudge against you, even if I wanted to. You grew up with me as family.'

I leaned in for a hug. His words spoke to me very deeply. I had expected another outburst, but Jo'Ori was surprisingly calm about everything.

'Look, Vai. I believe you can be the best sorceress to walk the face of Amalon, but I don't think this is the best place for you to do so.

Don't chain yourself down to Vilgmeri. I do so because I run a business, the tavern is all I have.

You, on the other hand, have much more to see and learn. You need to discover who you are.

Raim did so when he came here, now it's your turn. Go somewhere, to a place where your potential will shine. Somewhere, where using astral powers is just an everyday chore.' Jo'Ori explained.

I took those words to heart, and they would plague my mind for the hours to follow.

Once we arrived at the tavern, it was eight in the evening. I sat at the bar, drinking beer. Jo'Ori was cleaning dishes as the other barkeeps were mopping the floor and cleaning tables.

Suddenly, a loud bang sounded from the entrance of the tavern.

‘Jo’Ori?’ A muffled voice was to be heard.
‘Where? Thank you.’ The door was opened aggressively, from which three officers emerged and walked up to the bar, close to where I was sitting.

‘Jo’Ori is you, I assume?’ One of them said.

‘That would be me indeed, gentlemen. What’s the occasion?’ Jo’Ori replied.

‘Ihre J’Ato was killed two days ago. We have come to you for any information you might have.’ Another added.

Jo’Ori chuckled: ‘And what makes you think I have any information that might help you, gentlemen? All I do, I just tend to the customers.’

The third stepped forward and threw the mugs, that were laid out on the bar, to the ground:
‘Listen here wide-eyes, we don’t have time for clever heads, answer the question.’

‘Was that really necessary?’ Jo’Ori asked annoyed.

‘Answer!’ They yelled.

‘Gentlemen, I assure you, that there is nothing that I know of. He was a returning customer for a while, but I haven’t seen him in the last few days. Didn’t think much of it. We weren’t close, so I didn’t know what he was up to. I’m a barkeep, I pour beer, not run after people to keep relationships healthy.’ Jo’Ori answered.

The three looked at Jo’Ori in a threatening manner. I was ready to cast a spear form, the moment one of them jolted, but instead they moved away from the bar, keeping eye contact with Jo’Ori.

‘And by the way,’ Jo’Ori added, ‘next time, don’t threaten the barkeep.’ He said, nodding his head at the remaining customers who had all stood up from their chairs.

The three looked behind them, observing the customers, and then looked back at Jo’Ori, while walking towards the door: ‘If we find anything, we’ll contact you.’

‘Always welcome at the Drunken Sails, gentlemen!’ He yelled out before they left.

Once they were gone, the customers sat down again, and Jo’Ori continued to clean the dishes. I went over to the place where the mugs had been dropped, picked them up, and placed them on the bar.

‘Weird people.’ Jo’Ori said.

‘Why didn’t you just tell them that I was responsible?’ I asked.

Jo’Ori raised an eyebrow: ‘Over my dead body. Those bastards don’t need information from me. They’ll spend three more days searching, and then drop the case and write it off as an ‘accident’.’

‘Thank you.’ I said sincerely.

Jo’Ori smiled in return.

Chapter 4: Teaching the Teacher

‘Eviri Ati!’ He said as I watched the leaf catch on fire.

‘Atvi! Not Ati!’ I yelled.

Wu looked embarrassed towards me: ‘I was cl-’

‘Close yeah, but one letter makes a huge difference!’ I interrupted.

He took one of his books and slammed the leaf to extinguish the flames. He then let out a sigh and took another leaf from his jar. Upon laying it on the table, he once again uttered: ‘Eviri Atvi.’ This caused the leaf to start levitating at his command, gesturing it with his hand.

‘There you go. Well done.’ I complimented.

‘You say that as if you have been doing magic for the entirety of your life.’ Zo Rei Wu said, gliding the leaf around the room.

‘I have.’ I answered.

‘Yes, but not optitari or rynki. They are totally different from your ‘Astral Arts’.’ He said in a mocking voice.

I rolled my eyes, moving over to his shelf, and activating the hidden door, at the end of which was the portal that led to Vjani’tar, the realm of grotls. I stepped through the portal and got transported to Vjani’tar. Upon arrival, I felt a little dizzy but had gotten used to the feeling by now.

‘Vai! Greetings!’ Torga said.

I was glad to see them again. I crouched to match his height: ‘Hey Torga! How’s it been?’

‘As good as always, Vai! Our master takes good care of us!’ He replied.

‘Glad to hear that’ I said, chuckling. ‘How’s the research been going?’

Torga reached into his satchel and took out a paper which he unfolded and handed to me: ‘We have made significant progress in our interrealm travel project. Rynki can reshape realm shifts, which allows us to create a tear in the fabric of our realm. Supposedly, if we were to create four

tears at different locations in Vjani'thar, and connect them, we should be able to temporarily create a dummy realm shift.'

'Impressive work Torga! Keep it up.' I said, patting him on the back and standing back up.

Then, Wu appeared behind me: 'Any news?'

'Yes, actually. They are finding a way to create tears which would potentially create a fake realm shift.' I explained.

Wu smiled: 'Great!'

I didn't fully understand the concept of the realms, so I had to ask him for an in-depth explanation: 'Hey Wu, you mind running me through your 'plan' again? I don't understand the whole realm traversal.'

He nodded and took me to the observatory the grotls had built. It housed all the equipment Zo Rei Wu needed to create his enchantments and study the realms. He brought me to his large table which had all kinds of papers with equations on them and theoretical analyses.

‘Take a seat.’ He said, pointing at the nearest chair.

‘A realm is a concept, where a world beyond the one we are currently in, exists and functions without our dependency. In other words, a world on a plane of existence beyond ours.’ He said.

‘Right.’ I confirmed, nodding my head.

‘To define it graphically, imagine a plane with a horizontal and a vertical line. The horizontal one indicates the space of a realm, and the vertical one, the time they flow in.’

I once again nodded as he drew this image on the board in front of me.

‘Now, if we separate the space segment, in multiple sections, we have essentially defined realms on a graph. Each realm takes up about the same amount of space, and all of them flow in time. The time flow is the first difference. Suppose you have two humans, born at the same moment. Within the same realm, they experience time the same way. But, the moment we move one of them to a different realm, the way they experience time changes. After ten years, one

might be ten years old, the other fifty.’ His explanation was always thorough and interesting. He might be one to mess up a lot of his casts, rendering him borderline useless in a combat scenario, but he’s a great researcher and a teacher.

‘Next, every realm has its walls, called barriers. These realm barriers are static, and never change over time. Now, imagine one of the realms, moving slightly more left or right, it would-’

‘Interfere with its neighboring realm’ I finished his sentence.

‘Exactly! Creating... something. I don’t really know what would happen, seeing as no one has ever done that before.’ He exclaimed.

‘And that’s the realm shift Torga was talking about. But, it’s unstable, cataclysmic. How are you planning on circumventing that?’ I asked.

‘Well, that’s where our research comes into play. Theoretically, a dummy realm shift is just a shift without change, which means that it should not be physically achievable. But, given that we create four different tears in this realm, we’d

have four different points of entrance. Before activating them, we'd have to connect them. If all of them can cause a dummy shift, it'd be like a rope holding together a crate of beer.' He explained.

'Crate of beer? In what sense?' I inquired.

He corrected his hair and made more space on his board. Then he continued: 'Well, a realm shift can either be nearside or the farside, meaning it can be either on the left barrier or the right one. If two of them are on either side, they'll withhold one another, stabilizing without any interference.'

I stood up and moved closer to the board: 'But why only four?'

He scratched his head before answering: 'An uneven amount would unbalance the tension. If either the nearside or the farside is overstressed, that part will give way and fall apart. That would be considered an actual realm shift, and not a dummy one. Two tears would not be strong enough, and six would be too heavy for this realm to handle.'

I turned to him: ‘Alright, I understand. But why do you want to do this?’

He looked at me confused. ‘What do you mean? This is what I have been doing for my whole life. Pushing the boundaries of reality!’ He said smiling.

‘Sure, but what do you achieve from this? And what if it fails? You can cause the death of millions just by the smallest fragment of a mistake, Wu.’ I said.

‘I’m sorry, but isn’t that a bit hypocritical, coming from a person that kills people?’ He replied, taking an unnecessary jab at me. ‘Look, we are so used to knowing what we can do. We are conscious of who we are and what we can achieve.’ He started. ‘Now, imagine we find a way to travel to a realm, that is way beyond ours. A place where the time flow is so drastically different, that we are just a speck of dust in their eyes. If we can find a species that is more intelligent than us, we can find a way to harvest that intelligence and enhance it. Imagine the potential of everything: medicine, magic, enchantments, military, economy...’

His views were idealistic. Always chasing a goal way beyond his comprehension. But, all in all, I couldn't help but admire him. I had never met such a dedicated master of his craft before.

Ervenian enchantments are something beyond anything I've ever seen. It can change things in a way that I have never seen before. It is beautiful, as much as it is horrifying. Much like the astral magic we learn back home.

'I hope you know what you are doing, Wu. This is borderline suicide, and the odds you are clinging on are negligible.' I informed him.

He chuckled: 'I have morphed only once. My elders didn't care for magic, let alone realm traversal. Hence why I, Zo Rei Wu, will become the first enchanted to enable interrealm traversal!'

'And why exactly 'interrealm'? I mean, you have the stones to open portals to other realms, why are you so focused on going from one realm to another?' I asked.

'Theoretically speaking, there is a law of Action-Reaction in the realms. If one realm has a realm shift and interferes with another, other realms

which are further on the horizontal line, should not feel the consequences. However, the closer the realm shift moves to the distant realms, the more they'll start feeling it.' He said.

I raised my brow: 'So?'

'We know that Amalon is on a plane that is disconnected from the others. But nothing tells us that Amalon isn't just another realm that we happen to live in. Hypothetically, a dummy shift doesn't create any real changes, meaning that if this kind of traversal is possible, other realms could be accessed safely. That is of course, as long as the realm we are entering, isn't drastically different from our realm. Which technically speaking, make us combust and explode on the spot.' He said.

'Very reassuring. But what's the problem with the stones? You have a portal to Vjani'thar, why can't you have the same kinds, just to other dimensions?' I asked.

'The stones are unstable. They can only cast so much power until they either lose it or break it. If it breaks, the connection is severed, and if you remain in that realm, you have no way back. If it

loses its power, it'll remain in a perpetual state of static transference, a door to nowhere. I am lucky to have found a way to keep this portal stable while I'm working. But once this inter-realm traversal is figured out, we have a way to go in and out safely, within our bodily limits of course.' He explained.

I looked at him: 'Wu, you are either a mad genius or really stupid. And in the name of the Astrals, I hope that it's the former.'

Chapter 5: Madman's Knowledge

A bright purple mist had appeared in front of me. It had a warm glow to it. I couldn't feel anything, as if I had been in some kind of paralysis. The only thought in my head was to touch the mist, which I couldn't resist. I slowly moved towards it, and eventually, it engulfed me, transporting me to a different place.

Upon arrival, things looked hazy, indistinguishable from one another, as if looking at a reflection on the surface of harsh waters.

'Finally. You have accepted me.' I heard a whispering voice, which sounded extremely loud.

'Who are you?' I yelled, looking around me in panic. My vision had started to return but wasn't fully restored yet.

'So many moons, I have waited, dormant. Waiting for someone who understands me. You, Vai, understand me.' The voice repeated.

I rubbed my eyes, and moments later my vision returned. Upon looking ahead of me, a beautiful carpet had been laid out, one that I recognized very well. The walls were decorated with fire chalices and chandeliers, which lit up the interior. The carpet led to a throne in, on which sat an unfamiliar person, which I had made out to be a man.

‘Welcome.’ He said with a smile.

He was wearing a blue robe with a hood, covering his face, holding a staff in his right hand, which housed a crystal atop. A moment later, I heard a crow sitting on a windowsill, looking at me.

‘Who are you?’ I asked yet again.

He chuckled: ‘I go by many names, a traitor, a tyrant, a scholar. Which one would you prefer?’

‘Whichever describes you the best.’ I answered.

He got up from the throne and moved to where the crow was sitting. Upon arrival, the crow flew up onto his shoulder.

‘Valikath Elebor Dani, at your service.’ He said, looking over his shoulder.

My eyes widened. Elebor Dani? I must’ve misheard that. There is no way that... I tried forming a bolt in my hands, but I felt weak, I could barely move my hands.

‘That won’t work, Vai. You know very well that in visions, one cannot use magic. Basics of the astral, page four hundred fifteen.’ He said, knowing perfectly what I was doing.

‘No. Valikath, the one who brought students through pain and suffering in your inhumane experiments!’ I yelled.

‘Oh, so you do know me?’ He asked.

‘What do you mean Elebor Dani? That’s my last name!’ I said aggressively.

He chuckled again: ‘Yes, hundred fifty years since my death. I have counted. Hoping for someone to reach out, but no one was there, in a void of nothingness.’

I tried moving yet again, but it was futile. It was just me and him, in a room I had seen many

times before. The throne was unique, one that I have never seen anywhere else. But, from the style and the looks, it resembled the astral element. I have always wondered where this throne was located, and why I was constantly seeing it.

‘But, worry not. For you are here now.’ He said.

I was confused: ‘Why am I seeing you? And why in this place?’

He turned around and walked over to me: ‘This used to be my throne. I am the one who formed the first high council. I am the one who created the astral studies. And you, finally able to hear me, are who will help me achieve my goals.’

‘No. You did horrible things to people. How can you communicate with me when you’ve been dead for over a century?’ I asked.

‘It is as simple as reaching a hand, and pulling a soul back from the realm of death.’ He said looking at me.

I was left speechless. Only after moments did I realize that my mouth was left open.

‘You... you were the one...’ I started.

‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Vai. I am no Astral being, just a simple sorcerer.’ He interrupted.

‘How are you in my visions then?’ I asked.

‘Because my soul is in your possession as well, just like the Astral.’ He said.

‘Wait...’ I said. ‘So my lack of judgment, my understanding of justice, was tainted by you?’

I could not believe my thoughts, or what remained of them, they were all over the place.

‘What I did, I did to help you. It was to open your eyes to possibilities beyond your reason. One soul to kill means another one to power me. It turns out, that manipulating an Astral, isn’t so difficult after all.’ He exclaimed.

This reply terrified me. How long had I been under his influence? What was he doing all this time?

‘Monster...’ I said without a second thought.

‘I’m sure many would think that. But you know what is bizarre? When I met Dorothum, their first question was ‘What were your biggest achievements?’, and that made me think. Realistically, nothing is impossible, as long as we have astral magic. His question scared me because, at the time, I couldn’t come up with a straight answer. They took me to a dark place, a void beyond the light, where I was left to float among the unknown. This plagued me for an eternity, until someone opened a tear back to the physical world, recalling one of the Astrals to answer. Aradoth, my most foolish student, yet so adamant on achieving his goals, opened a frame of opportunity. I took it.’ He explained.

‘Why me?’ I whispered.

Valikath sat back on his throne: ‘Not you. Raim. He was my first host. He had a strong mind, one I couldn’t reach out to, no matter how much I tried, he wouldn’t listen. You, on the other hand, are open to it.’

I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach as if I was drowning, my heart rate had slowed down, and my eyes were slowly shutting off.

‘Looks like we’ve run out of time, Vai. Next time I expect you to be prepared, we may be able to help one another.’ He said.

After this, my mind went blank. Moments later, as if awakening from a nightmare, I opened my eyes, breathing wildly. Only after a minute, I realized that I was sitting on my knees, meditating.

‘Visions again?’ I heard Raim’s voice to my right. He came over to me and reached his hand out to me, which I grabbed and he helped me up.

‘Yeah.’ I answered.

‘Anything new?’ He asked.

‘No.’ I replied quickly. ‘Nothing, just the same things again: the same room, the same throne.’

Raim raised his brow: ‘You’ll find it eventually Vai.’

‘I must return.’ I said suddenly.

Raim looked at me with a questioning face:

‘Return to the tavern?’

‘No. Home.’ I said.

A moment of silence settled in, after which Raim nodded: ‘Okay. Keep yourself safe, Vai.’

‘I will.’ I said, reaching my arm out.

Raim grabbed my forearm: ‘May the astral guide you.’ We both said in unison.

After that, I put on my hood grabbed my satchel, and moved out towards the docks to get on the first ship to High Valomor.

Chapter 6: Where it all began

Leaving the deck and removing my hood, revealed the enormous Front Vanguard. I stood at the entrance of the outer docks which were overlooked by the Vanguard. The breeze was cold and the waves were crashing into the wood at a steady pace. I collected my courage and walked through the barrier separating the Valomorans from the outer world.

Walking through the barrier felt weird. Something I hadn't felt for the last twelve years. The general feeling had changed upon crossing the border, it became much warmer and the cold breeze had toned down. The wind was blowing softly and the falling leaves from the trees caressed the grass gently.

The border patrol didn't halt me, probably because they recognized my robe and hood. I walked further towards the front lake, hoping to find a boat ride to Hidden Lowval, my birthplace.

‘Hey Mela, what do you think will happen?’ I asked.

‘Depends on what you are planning on doing, Vai.’ They replied.

I looked down, tracing my steps as I walked: ‘I haven’t been here for twelve years. I don’t even know if my teachers are still here. And what about the magistrates? What will they think?’

‘A vessel carrying an Astral like me is no different than a vessel without one.’ They exclaimed. ‘We differ in ways visible only to the eye of the beholder. As long as you are in no need of my assistance, no one should notice anything amiss.’

I smiled: ‘Thank you, Mela.’

‘I cannot value words of appreciation, Vai. It is pointless to express it towards me.’ They said.

I looked up at the crows that flew over my head. I had noticed that the wind had picked up, luckily it was in my favor, pushing me towards the boats.

‘Jo once told me, that words carry meaning and weight. The further the importance of the words to you, the lighter they are, the less meaning they carry for you. But, saying something of significant meaning to someone, often referring to grief or sadness, has immense weight, thus the person you speak the words to feels it stronger.’ I said.

‘Acknowledged.’ Mela replied.

Soon after, we arrived at the small pier which housed about a dozen wooden boats. I approached the only man I saw sitting by the shore, eating something.

‘Blessed day, sir. Could you please transport me to Hidden Lowval?’ I asked him politely.

The man nodded and stood up to get the paddles. He then untied the rope that held the boat to the pier and told me to get in, after which we silently traversed across the waters. It took about five minutes for us to arrive at the other side, docking the boat to the shore.

I paid the man and thanked him for his service. I got out of the boat and moved closer to the inner

Lowval, which was behind the gates. I stood there watching the gates, reminiscing about the classes that I have had here in the past. Moving up through the streets, nothing much had changed, other than some training grounds being empty, though it was a resting day, so I wasn't too surprised.

'Weird.' I whispered, moving further down the street.

'What troubles you, Vai?' Mela asked.

I looked around: 'It's awfully quiet. Unusual for this place.'

The shuffling of the leaves was the main sound covering my ears. The silence was deafening, so much so that even the playgrounds were deserted.

'It has been a significant amount of time since your last visit.' They said.

I moved over to where I used to have classes. The Lowvalian School of Acquired Astral Magic Arts remained just as I had left it, but the classrooms looked barren as if no one had been there for a prolonged amount of time.

The walls were dried and full of cracks. The boards were moldy, the floor full of dust and the chairs were thrown everywhere.

‘Where is everyone?’ I thought to myself, inspecting my surroundings.

‘What have you forgotten here, young lady?’ I heard someone say from behind.

I turned around and met the gaze of an elderly woman using a walking stick to come closer to me.

‘Blessed day, ma’am. What happened here?’ I asked her.

She looked confused: ‘Are you not from around here? This place has been desolated for the last ten years.’

‘Ten years? How is that possible?’ I asked again.

The woman’s eyes widened: ‘About ten years ago, Aradoth had left these lands with students, scholars, and magistrates, planning to attack R’Oth Vilgmeri. A couple of dozen of them returned, and even fewer of them survived

afterward. Hidden Lowval has not been the same ever since.'

I had never thought about the Valomorians after the war. I was so isolated from them, that even thinking of the repercussions, was something out of line.

'I... I must go, thank you.' I told the old lady, rushing off towards the capital.

After about thirty minutes of walking, I sat down on a tree stump and took out my food from the satchel.

'Mela, is this location safe?' I asked them.

'You're not in view of any imminent threats.' They responded.

I sat down on my knees and focused on my thoughts. After a couple of seconds, everything darkened. I felt like I was floating in the nothingness. Moments later, the same old room was reconstructed in front of me.

'Welcome back.' Valikath said as I entered.

I opened my eyes, but yet again, I could not move a muscle.

‘Explain. Why are you here?’ I asked him.

He got up from his throne: ‘You accepted me. I explained this already.’

‘No, explain to me, why you are here, why me?’ I demanded.

He sighed: ‘You are my granddaughter. If not you, then who? Besides, you wield great power, I’m proud of that.’

I became angrier: ‘What is your goal?’

He approached me: ‘We can become something greater. Vai! You and me, working hand in hand. We will be unstoppable!’

I raised my eyebrows: ‘Unstoppable? Why? Why would someone need to stop us?’

‘Vai, you are just a mere speck of what you could possibly become. I cannot help physically, so I had to reach out to you, so you could grab my hand, so I could pass my knowledge on to you. I was interrupted during my time on Amalon. I couldn’t work in peace. People said that I was a monster, fantasizing about how I, Valikath, killed off students, with no evidence to

back it up. I was simply researching astral magic. It wasn't anything special at first, but then I started noticing patterns. I reflected on actions that would lead me to discover more about the astral, on the verge of a breakthrough, but they didn't want me to succeed, they wanted me dead. Thus, I am here, talking to you, from beyond my grave.'

I was thinking about every word he said, I didn't know how to approach this, first the Astral and now him. Who was I supposed to listen to?

'Look, Vai. I know, I was distant. You have never known me, rarely anyone did. Your father was a great scholar, he was my only son, but he betrayed me. Me and you, we are on the same page. We want to learn more. So, if only this once, but put your trust in me. Together, we will achieve greatness!' He said, gesturing with his staff.

I was reluctant, but his words were convincing. His body language was clear, he wanted to form an alliance of sorts, a bond to strengthen us both.

‘Alright. I’ll try listening to you, it’ll be hard to suppress the Astral, so don’t expect me to hear you every time.’ I told him.

He nodded in agreement. ‘Not a problem Vai. For now, our main mission is to reach my study room. It was behind the main library. I kept all my studies in there. I hid it well so that no one would be harmed if they had tried using what I had studied.’

I was confused: ‘Harmed? So your research is harmful? Are you planning on returning to your old ways?’

‘No, child, you do not understand me. It isn't about what we have done wrong Vai, or who got hurt by our actions. It's about opportunity, and what we can do in the future! An omniscient without action is just an idiot with knowledge. To solve some things, others must be sacrificed.’ He explained.

‘And your understanding of ‘sacrifice’ is to’ I caught off guard by a feeling of distress. Someone was watching me.

‘We will continue this conversation, Valikath!’ I yelled, before redirecting my focus and losing sight of the throne room. Purple lines appeared in my vision, leading to my left, until they intersected with a moving object, outlining it. That revealed a quadrupedal being that was stalking me, ready to pounce. I opened my eyes and immediately got ready to defend myself.

Looking into the distance, the being was revealed to be a large predator with spikes covering its back, and realizing that I had detected it, it started shrieking. ‘An ashkari? This far out from the woods?’ I thought to myself, readying hammer form.

The beast bolted towards me, and I dodged out of the way and recoiled. It then twirled and tried hitting me with its tail, which I jumped over. Afterward, it dove in for a bite, but I ducked under, pushing it with magic, forcing it to dive over me and roll further. Upon regaining footing, the beast became angry, and its spikes started to glow red. It rushed to me, trying to bite, but I moved back, smashing it to the side, forcing it to tumble over. Now dazed, I ran towards it breaking off three of its spikes, after which it let

out an unbearable scream. Blood was streaming down on its back, but it was unrelenting. It got up and tried striking me with its paws. I quickly cast a mirror form, leaving a projection of myself behind, redirecting the beast's attention to it, while I prepped a ball form and threw it at the ashkari, slicing off its tail. He started limping, the bloodstream had accelerated and the color had darkened, it was gravely wounded. After a couple of dozen meters, it dropped to the ground. I couldn't leave it suffering like this, so I had to make a decision, and my decision was swiftly made. I cast a siphon form, siphoning its soul out of its body, killing it instantly.

'May Aykos guide your soul, brave one.' I whispered.

By now, the sun had reached its highest point in the sky, and the surroundings were well-illuminated. I had arrived at the capital, facing the main library. The stairs were a lot smaller than I remembered, but I had assumed that as a kid, everything looked larger in comparison.

'Halt!' I heard someone say. It was one of the guards. 'Passage to non-scholars is forbidden.'

‘Forbidden? It’s the main library, everyone can access it.’ I said.

They looked annoyed. A second guard appeared from behind the first one, who proceeded to laugh: ‘Miss, have you been falling behind? Are you a magistrate perhaps? Haha! No access to students or non-registered personnel. You may not proceed unless you have your dedicated scholar’s permission card.’

This was all so confusing. I understood that I was gone for a decade, but for it to change this much? What kind of impact did Aradoth have?

‘A traitor has arrived!’ I heard a familiar voice say. When I looked up, I immediately recognized my old teacher.

‘Evordo! Thank the astral! These guards are not let-’ I was interrupted by him.

‘You think you can just walk in here when you please, and do as you wish? I can smell the Vilgmeri stench emitting from you! You fought against your brethren, didn’t you?’ He said skeptically.

I looked at him in confusion: ‘Sir? I don’t understand where all this hatred is coming from. Besides, it was Aradoth who started this! We had no choice but to defend ourselves.’

‘We? Oh it’s ‘we’ now isn’t it?’ He said angrily.

Other scholars emerged from atop the stairs, looking at me with disgust.

‘Look, I don’t know what kind of stories you have heard, but please ju-’ I couldn’t finish my sentence before I felt a harsh push onto my left shoulder, forcing me to my knee.

‘You shouldn’t have come here!’ Evordo screamed.

‘E-enough!’ I said, slowly standing back up. Having noticed this, the others started assisting him, keeping me down. I then saw Evordo using spear form, which sent me in distress, seeing as I couldn’t fight off all of their might at once.

‘Stop!’ I yelled, ‘STOP!’ I screamed, louder this time, but it was futile, Evordo was not backing down. ‘STOP!’ I screamed, this time unbalancing everyone in front of me. I couldn’t feel my body anymore, I felt as if I had become

hollow. I had realized that I wasn't in control anymore, Mela had taken over.

‘What in the name of astral?’ One of them said.

Mela gently swiped with their hand to the right, forcing Evordo to fly against the stone railing of the stairs. Another two tried using spells, which Mela just deflected back at them, decapitating one of them in the process. She then swiftly displaced towards another one, snapping their neck, and the last one taken aback by the fear, held his hands up. Mela then slightly pushed the door to the main library, breaking them off, and giving control back to me.

‘Woah!’ I said, inspecting my hands. Lines were streaming through my body, which dissipated after a short while.

‘Threat eliminated.’ I heard Mela say.

‘Thank you.’ I replied.

Chapter 7: False purpose

Valikath's study was messy and unattended. Chairs and tables were thrown around, papers covered the ground and what once was in a tall glass, had now evaporated on the desk.

I inspected the surroundings, but nothing much came of it. There were shelves stacked with books and scripts. It seemed like the place had been disturbed after Valikath's leave, which means that others were interested in his studies. The door to the study was labeled as 'inaccessible', which meant that only qualified personnel would have access to this place. What was he researching? So much so that he was killed for it.

I shuffled some papers on the dusty desk, and from the looks of it, nothing special was written on them. I looked through the shelves and skimmed through some of the scripts, but they were just study material for the students.

Suddenly, I heard the door croak behind me, I turned around and immediately readied the spear form in case I were to be attacked.

‘I too, am glad to see you, Vai.’ It was Tiryo, a friend from before I had left High Valomor.

My eyes lit up: ‘Tiryo! What a surprise. How has it been?’

He closed the door behind him and looked around: ‘It’s been alright. Heard that something had happened at the library’s doors, so thought maybe I should come and check it out. Sounded like trouble I recognized.’

I dissipated the spell and moved closer to him.

‘I’m so incredibly sorry, I was attacked, so I had to defend myself. I-’ He cut me off.

‘No worries, I heard others say that it was self-defense. Those grumpy old men were just there to get in everyone’s way and ruin everyone’s mood. However, public execution is new. Haven’t seen our magic decapitate people’s heads before.’ He said, leaning against a wall.

‘How come you decided to show up?’ I asked.

He chuckled: ‘Because I am one of the keepers of the library.’

I raised my eyebrows: ‘Oh wow! That’s awesome! Sorry for vandalism though... opened the doors a little too hard.’

He smiled: ‘No big deal, we repair those doors every other day anyways, they’re old and need replacement. What are you doing here?’

I didn’t know how to answer him. I knew that saying the name ‘Valikath’ would label me as an enemy, so I had to come up with something believable.

‘I have dedicated my life to astral studies, even from beyond Valomor. I have been doing my best and training nearly every day.’ I corrected one of the fallen chairs and sat on it. ‘I heard that there is interesting information to be found in this chamber. One where Valikath used to conduct his research.’

He looked down at the floor, then moved away from the wall and moved closer to one of the shelves.

‘Valikath kept a lot of his research in secret. Most of his research has been taken away and replaced by fake data.’ He said, looking at me angrily.

‘How very interesting.’ I replied looking at him dead in the eyes.

‘Students are forbidden from entering the premises.’ He said. ‘People that break a said rule, are either committing a crime of attempted theft or have information unavailable to the general populous.’

We both stared at one another for a little while. I could feel the tension rise, it felt awkward, knowing that he caught me in a criminal act red-handed. The staring continued until he jolted and twirled, snapping his fingers and summoning an astral spear mid-motion. I dodged out of the way as he thrust it forward, piercing the leg of the desk behind me. I cast chain form, chaining his hands to the ground and kicking him in the face, which sent him tumbling back.

He landed on his knees and immediately dashed forward towards me, I yet again dodged, but he didn’t stop there, once he lost momentum, he

spun the spear around him, sweeping my legs, and forcing me to the ground. He then punched me in my ribs a couple of times, after which he recalled his spear and tried stabbing my torso, which I rolled away from, immediately using hammer form to send him off balance. In doing so I dashed to him, using the siphoning form, weakening him in the process. I had noticed that the siphon was very weak, must've been because of his strong soul. After a moment of trying, the siphoning had been broken, and he kicked me in the knee, lowering me, and kicking into my face, which forced me back.

After a moment, we both had regained footing. He then threw his spear towards me, missing me. I immediately recognized what he was doing, and dashed in with spear form, piercing his chest all the way through. He coughed blood onto my shoulder, as I removed my hand, which had been through his chest.

I heard the sound of his spear disappearing, as he stumbled backward. Eventually, he sank to his knees, coughing up more blood and hyperventilating.

I was taking breaths, feeling exhausted from the fight. I too, had been lowered to my knees in front of him.

‘W...why?’ I asked.

He looked at me, but no words came out, instead, he just fell to the ground, dead.

‘Damnit... Damnit! DAMNIT! AAAGH!’ I screamed in my lungs.

I felt lightheaded. Sounds had sunk, like being underwater, nothing was to be heard.

‘You did well, Vai.’ I heard Valikath’s voice.

‘No! He was my friend.’ I could feel tears fall from my eyes, but I didn’t feel like crying, I was emotionless. ‘What is this? What am I feeling?’

‘You are free.’ Valikath said. ‘You have broken the chains of emotions. You no longer have to feel unnecessary sadness.’

‘Why?’ I asked hopelessly.

‘Warriors feel no pain nor fear! You are way above a warrior, Vai! You are on the verge of greatness!’ Valikath replied.

I was not used to this, I couldn't hear Mela anymore, all the sound was drowned out by Valikath. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't reach Mela.

‘What did you do to Mela?’ I questioned.

‘They are here. But they are a mere tool. Use them as your lifeline, but do not rely on them. They are useless otherwise.’ He replied. ‘Vai, I can finally communicate with you. Listen to me, the shelf to your far right, go there.’ He directed me.

I did as he asked, approaching the shelf with a bunch of books.

‘Now, repeat after me: Udur Vuri Humtir Dem.’ He said, and I repeated.

In doing so, weird symbols had appeared on the shelf, turning it purple. After a moment, the shelf split in half and opened like a door. Behind it, was a whole another part of the chamber, hidden away behind this shelf.

‘Here we are.’ Valikath said. ‘This is where I conducted all my research.’

The room was filled with books and scripts. Visually, it was not much different than the other chamber, but upon closer inspection, I realized that the chamber was a one-to-one copy of the previous one.

‘The chamber is a duplicate. How?’ I asked.

‘Mirror form, Vai. Astral magic is more than just a tool, it’s a way of life, soon you’ll learn.’ He answered.

I moved closer to the desk, which was covered with books, written by Valikath himself. He studied the way astral shapes things, and whether it could reshape reality as we know it. He was practicing forms I had never heard of before: Wisdom form, Pyro form, Catalyst form, Decay form, and many more.

‘What are these forms?’ I asked, looking through his books.

‘The potential Vai. It is what the astral can do, but we just can’t fathom it yet. Astral is the most powerful power in Amalon. It can reshape reality, Vai! Do you understand the power that holds? Imagine, creating a perfect world, where

nothing can potentially go wrong! Everyone is perfect, everyone possesses the knowledge needed to do everything perfectly.'

'You wanted to turn them into puppets?' I criticized him.

'It is no use to understand this on a shallow level Vai. Do you want to do just and bring peace? Then we need this to work! You can help me to make this happen so that my years of dedicated work doesn't sink unsolved. You, in turn, will be the strongest mage ever known to man! The astral throne, right? It keeps appearing in your visions. I don't know what it is, or where it may be located, but you'd be able to find it.' He said.

I put down the book I was holding and thought everything through. Though, it wasn't easy to conclude, because a lot of my thoughts were clouded, as if I couldn't control them.

'Alright Valikath. You're dead anyway, might as well put this knowledge to good use. But you aren't getting your perfect world! I will be the judge of what happens with this power once it is discovered.' I told him.

‘As you command, Vai.’ He replied.

Now all that was left, was to read through these books and find out what he was trying to decipher in detail.

Chapter 8: Intervention

The streets were busy, much like when I left the place. The main street led straight to the school, which could be seen towering over other buildings. Scholars populated the area, and kids were yelling, playing, and studying. It felt nice being in a place that I recognized so well.

‘So, you’re saying that, if given the opportunity, you’d sacrifice one of the counselors?’ I asked Valikath.

‘Absolutely. They possess power that other men are not allowed to know of! Of course, I’d sacrifice one of them, if not all!’ He exclaimed.

I didn’t understand his obsession with astral magic. Yes, we are born with astral surrounding us, but to what degree is one willing to go, to learn it?

‘Valikath, you are a criminal. As much as I’d like to see you perform various astral forms, I simply cannot allow myself to trust you fully.’ I explained.

‘Vai, you are young. You do not yet understand what you are denying, but I do not blame you. I was a criminal yes, I have committed atrocities. Went against the code of the council, the council I had created. But it has been over eighty years now, times change.’ He said.

‘Yes, but you don’t, do you?’ I questioned.

Valikath was lost for words, but I knew what the answer was. He was denying the crucial detail about his thirst for power. He was just like Aradoth, if not worse. I was very aware of the fact that he was a criminal and not trustworthy, but my clouded thoughts, now louder than ever, were difficult to ignore. I had been feeling dizzy and tired, but not out of it yet. I had no idea what was going on in my head, and why I felt this way, something was out of order, and I bet Valikath knew this.

In the meantime, I had arrived at the doorstep of my school. The gates were open, as always, so I just walked in. The halls were just like I remembered them: the beautiful white pillars carrying the weight of the painted walls, depicting war and death. The living paintings,

how I had missed them. Always telling stories, even if it has no listeners.

‘Can I help you?’ I heard someone say. It was a scholar I didn’t know.

‘Uh, yes. Can you lead me to the council?’ I asked.

The man looked strangely at me: ‘The council? You mean the board of grand scholars?’

I was confused, what did he mean by that?

‘Excuse me?’

‘The High Council hasn’t existed for about a decade now. Are you new here?’ He said.

I shook my head: ‘Just bring me to the scholars.’

I followed in his step, leading me through the darkened halls of the school.

‘How peculiar.’ Valikath said.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘They disbanded the High Council. Counselors are now mere grand scholars. How far they’ve fallen.’

‘I wonder if the counselors are still here. The new leading regime must mean large-scale changes to society. Bad, in other words, considering what I saw back in Lowval.’ I told him.

‘Counselors are not omitted that easily, they have crucial information about the astral and its arts. Ridding themselves of a counselor would mean throwing away information about the astral, which they already don’t have much of.’ Valikath explained.

Eventually, we reached the door that led to the chamber where the former councilors held their meetings. Upon entering the room, six scholars looked at us.

‘Sorry for the intrusion, masters grand scholars.’ The scholar said, bowing. ‘This woman would like to have a word with you.’

‘We are busy. Disturb us later when w-’ interrupted one of them.

‘It won’t take long, I promise. Then I will be on my way, it is important.’ I said.

They looked at one another, and then back at me, after which one of them finally said: ‘Alright. Come on in.’

The scholar let me in and closed the door behind me, leaving me in the room with the grand scholars.

‘Take a seat.’ One of them offered, pointing me to the nearest chair at their table.

I sat down, took off my hood, and looked at them. I noticed that some of their faces lit up.

‘Vai? Daughter of Grundal Elebor Dani?’ One of them said.

‘Correct.’ I nodded.

‘You haven’t attended classes for the past decennium. Where have you been?’ They asked.

‘I had chased my dreams, exploring, meeting new people, learning things that are taught beyond these walls.’ I explained.

They looked at one another, displeased.

‘You are a sorcerer! You cannot just walk out of here during your study process! It is dangerous.’

I frowned: ‘Gentlemen, I am here to address something. It is about the studies of an old magistrate, the tyrant Valikath.’

They looked at me in surprise and anger: ‘Dare not to pronounce his name on these grounds!’

‘Listen. I am not here to fight but rather to inform you about the situation beyond the walls of this school. I recently visited Hidden Lowval and noticed that it was deserted, rid of all life. I understand that it’s difficult to find the time to care about the common folk, but maybe my words will convince you.’ I said.

One of them stood up: ‘But who do you think you are? Talking down to us like that!’

‘I am Vai Elebor Dani. Daughter of Grundal and granddaughter of Valikath Elebor Dani.’ I exclaimed.

Silence had set in. Everyone had ceased talking.

‘And I am here to ask you to bring me the locked away belongings of Valikath.’ I said, carefully inspecting every one of them.

‘We cannot provide you such things. They are considered cursed and therefore must be held out of reach of the general populous.’ Another one replied.

‘Worry not, I can handle it.’ I reassured.

‘What makes you think that we will just get up and bring you his belongings?’

‘Because you need my help. If I can get those relics, I’ll be able to help you rebuild the kingdom. Make it better than ever, and bring back the joy people felt coming here. I know many things, for example, the fact that the influx of visitors has fallen by a large margin, and no one cares about the Front Vanguard anymore. Isgard has ceased the trade with Lowval and Almari, losing about eighty percent of its income. I have read that the living conditions have drastically worsened, yet nothing is being done to change it.’ I painted a picture for them.

They stared at me, some with shame, knowing very well that what I was saying was the truth.

‘You possess no such power. You just wish to inherit what once was of Valikath. Those relics

are locked and are the possession of High Valomor. You shall not receive anything of sorts!’ They answered.

One of the scholars looked strangely at me: ‘How do you know of these relics? These have been kept secret for as long as Valikath has been lying in his grave.’

‘Are you saying that...’ One of them jumped in, ‘She’s connected to Valikath? That she can read his mind?’

‘We should burn her! She is too dangerous to be kept alive!’ Another yelled.

‘Gentlemen, let us not make a mess.’ I said.

‘I agree! Let us kill her. That soul of hers might come in handy if she is connected to Valikath.’

They stood up and summoned different forms in the palms of their hands. A moment later, one of them attacked me. I moved my shoulder and face away, dodging it effortlessly. I then shoved the table forward with my foot and rolled back.

Once I regained footing, I was getting ready to summon ball form, when I suddenly felt

disconnected from my body. My vision remained, but I no longer had control over my actions. I recognized this, assuming that Mela was helping me. It was then that I heard ‘Allow me.’ Being said by Valikath.

What? How did he... I was lost for words, I didn’t know what was happening. My vision had gone blue, seeing all the scholar’s organs very clearly.

‘It has been a while.’ Valikath said in my stead, and swiped his hand, dismembering one of the scholars almost instantly.

The others looked in shock, devastated. ‘What? How...’

Valikath then pointed towards another, and after a brief delay, his heart was ripped from his body and delivered to Valikath’s hand.

‘Great job Oridomi!’ He said, looking at his arm, where his crow had now been seated.

He squashed the heart in his hands, looking at the other scholars. Two others started running to the door, but Valikath ripped the door from its frame, smashing it into the two scholars with

just a simple gesture of his hands. The remaining two had cast a siphoning form, trying to tear his soul out of his body.

‘Really? Eighty years, for this? Pathetic.’ He said, grabbing the siphon that had been attached to his soul and pulling it towards himself, tearing the souls of the casters instead and dissipating them in thin air.

One of the scholars that had been hit with the door drew breath, really loudly. Valikath moved towards him, removing the door from the top, where the corpse of the other scholar was weighing on the barely alive one. Upon removing the corpse, the second scholar was revealed, lying in a pool of blood, which was presumably flowing from his back.

‘Please tell me, that the other magistrate still knows how to fight?’ He said to him.

The scholar was barely breathing.

‘Unbelievable. Eighty years and nothing changed! Is this what they call the astral arts?’ Valikath yelled.

Eventually, he stomped the face of the barely breathing scholar. ‘So incredibly pathetic.’

The entire room was covered in blood. It drew on the walls and flooded the floor. The blue vision had now disappeared, and my motoric skills had been returned to me.

‘What... what was that?’ I asked.

‘What? You needed help, and so I helped. Simple concept no?’ He answered.

‘But Mela...’

‘Mela and I both helped you. Manipulating an astral is simple, I’ve told you this already Vai. Pay attention from time to time.’ He said.

The rumbling had alerted others of the fight. Their footsteps could be heard in the hallways. With no way out, I took a Vjanistone from my satchel and opened a portal to Vjani’tar. Once I had stepped through the portal, I closed it behind me. I took a breath and turned back around, where I was met with a gaze of a dozen happy grotls, and Zo Rei Wu standing in front of me.

‘Vai? What in nature’s name?’ He exclaimed
when he saw me covered in blood.

Chapter 9: Call for help

‘Okay, wait... let me see if I understand this correctly. You have been feeling ‘not quite yourself’ lately, and as it turns out it was because of the soul of your dead grandfather, who was condemned to death by execution, and his soul now lives in your head? And to add salt to the wound, he’s replacing your former astral? Vai, did you consume jaika mushrooms?’

I planted my face into the palms of my hands: ‘No, Wu. Please you have to help me. Valikath is extremely powerful. I just committed a crime, of the highest degree, do you understand? I killed the councilors. I obliterated them in mere seconds. I need to get Valikath out of my head.’

Zo Rei Wu sat across me: ‘Vai you have gone insane. If what you are saying is true, and by the blood on your face I assume it’s true, then you are in deep trouble. You can’t just get rid of his soul, if he is attached to the astral, you’ll have to get rid of the astral completely to rid yourself of Valikath! He committed crimes not only when

he was alive, but in the afterlife too! He disrespected the balance of Aykos and Dorothum! You can't temper with the will of the sentinels!'

I looked up at him and then reached for a glass of water that was standing on the table next to me: 'I am willing to rid myself of the astral. So long that Valikath's soul lives, the astral cannot stand. I can feel Mela's power diminishing, Valikath taking control.'

'What do you want me to do?' Wu asked after a deep sigh.

I took a sip of the water and then looked at him dead in the eyes: 'I need Valikath's belongings.'

Wu's eyes widened, and his brows were now risen, clearly displeased by my answer.

'And what do these 'belongings' do?' He asked.

I shrugged: 'I don't know. The only thing I know is that they can help out Valikath, reach a definitive answer in his research. Once I have them, I can then decide what happens to that information.'

‘How important is this information?’ Wu questioned.

‘It can reconstruct reality. Astral is beyond what we had imagined, and we have barely scratched the surface, Wu. I am scared of what Valikath might do, thus I must attain those trinkets before he completely takes over my mind.’ I answered.

‘And what if you don’t attain that information?’

Silence settled in for a few.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know if I’ll be able to think straight, without Valikath’s influence.’

Wu wandered around the room, thinking about something. A loud sigh came from him as he looked through the window, gazing at the working grotls.

‘Vai, I wish not for your death. I have known you for far too long to let you die. I will lead you to a place I have kept secret for as long as I have known myself.’ He said, taking a red stone, which I recognized to be a portal stone, and threw it to the ground. A red portal opened up, one I hadn’t seen before.

‘I trust you to keep this secret.’ He said, walking through the portal.

I followed in his step, transporting him to a different realm. Upon arrival, I was met with a large door, which Wu had already opened. It led into a large hallway, which stretched as far as the eye could see. It was decorated with beautiful weaponry from all across the world. A pleasant scent covered the hall, and the pretty red carpet carved a path for us to walk down.

‘What is this place?’ I asked amazed.

‘This is Oakhatar, the realm of infinity. The realm I have been using to cover up Pumer and his theft.’ He said, walking down the hallway.

‘All Pumer’s stolen goods are here?’ I asked.

‘They are in pristine condition.’

I heard Wu chuckle: ‘Of course. His intentions were never malicious. He was a good man. I was devastated when I heard that he had left us. Who do you think guided his soul?’

‘Aykos.’ I answered.

‘Oh, you think?’ He said, turning to one of the displays.

‘No. I hope. He deserves it. Both him and Jo’Ori, they were inseparable.’ I exclaimed.

Wu was looking down at his feet, I could see a slight grin on his face. He then looked up in front of him: ‘Here we are. Aradoth’s belongings. All the things he stole from High Valomor.’

My eyes widened: ‘He stole from Valomor? How did he manage to make it out alive?’

Wu chuckled: ‘If only you knew how many times I have gotten him out of bad situations.’

He pushed a panel, which twisted something on the wall, opening it and leading us to the Valomorian section. The room was enormous, and decorated by Valomorian trinkets.

‘He stole an astral ring?’ I yelled, looking at a beautiful purple framed ring on the wall. ‘Those are literal relics from the astral era before Valomor even existed.’

‘That’s nothing. He once stole the Gilded Sword from the Juvali museum, cleaned it, got it back into shape, and brought it back to the museum the night after.’

‘Brought it back?’ I asked.

Wu nodded: ‘He didn’t like the design too much. Said it was too plain, but renovated it nonetheless.’

I glanced further down the room, noticing the trinkets that looked different than any other, they were Valikath’s. I moved over and grabbed them, storing them away in my satchel. Moments later we left the realm, returning to Amalon.

‘Thank you, Wu.’ I said to him, moving in for a hug. He opened his arms and hugged me as well.

‘Be careful, Vai.’ He said, to which I nodded in reply and used some dust to teleport back to my room. I noticed that it was turning night, so I took off my bag and coat, threw them next to my bed, and went to sleep.

The morning after, I woke up to the sound of the morning market. I rushed downstairs, seeing Jo at the bar, like always.

‘Hey!’ I said, getting his attention.

‘Oh, Vai! Welcome back. Hungry?’ He asked.

‘Starving.’ I replied, jumping onto the chair at the bar.

‘Ervi, go tell the chef to prepare twintail in butter and bacon.’ Jo said to one of his workers.

‘But sir, we don’t start serving food until twelve?’ Ervi questioned.

‘Ervi did I stutter?’ Jo said in a strict tone, to which Ervi nodded and ran upstairs.

Moments later, the door to the tavern had been kicked in by a group of military. They moved swiftly and loudly towards the bar.

‘Jo’Ori Amyja?’ One of them yelled out.

‘Yes, gentlemen. How may I help?’ He answered.

The other two suddenly grabbed my arms and dragged me off the chair.

‘We have orders from the Royal Army to take Vai in for homicide. She is a criminal of third

degree and must be held captive until her sentence has been spoken.’ The soldier said.

‘Hey let her go!’ Jo’Ori yelled.

‘No, don’t Jo. Let them. No need to cause trouble.’ I yelled.

He didn’t listen, charging in towards the soldiers, and getting hit in the nose.

‘Aagh!’ He yelled, holding his right hand out towards the bar to lean on it.

‘Hold back sir, before we are forced to take you in as well!’ The soldier yelled out.

After that, they dragged me out of the building, putting me into a carriage, which was reinforced with metal bars to keep people from escaping. I would’ve done something to break out of here, but I respected Jo’Ori too much to cause a scene here.

Chapter 10: A Promise

The rain was pouring, and the graveyard was very muddy. Most people had left by now, but I had remained, gazing into the distance, thinking about the war and the heroes such as Mar’Keth who had died in it, fighting valiantly.

‘He was a good soldier.’ I heard behind me.

I turned around to meet the face of a person I had never seen before. He was dressed up in lightweight clothing, head covered by his hood.

‘Too bad it was so short-lived.’ He moved up closer to the grave, placing purple flowers on it.

‘I see he had other friends too.’ I said.

‘Not really. We weren’t friends. Acquaintances more like.’ He explained.

Both of us stared at the grave silently.

‘Are you the assassin I keep on hearing about?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’ He said without hesitation.

‘You don’t look very geared.’ I exclaimed.

He looked up at me: ‘I have a strict rule to not disturb graveyards. We’re assassins, not monsters.’

A moment of silence passed as we both paid our respects to the deceased soldier.

‘He was a good soldier and a good teacher. I hated him, but he was good.’ He said.

I looked at him with raised eyebrows: ‘Teacher? You’re his student?’

‘He raised me like one of his own. He made me go through pain and suffering, but he made me into the man I am now. I betrayed him, if I could, I’d lay in that grave instead, but fate had other things in mind.’ He said.

‘I’m sure he’d feel the same way if your roles were inversed, Ryo Bin.’ I replied and noticed that he looked at me from the corner of my eye.

‘I hope not. No matter what I thought of him, he gave all he had for his country, his brethren, and me. I never did anything to repay him.

Hopefully, Aykos told him that I am grateful so

that his soul rests in peace.’ He whispered in a low tone.

I heard him taking a satchel from his belt, and handing it to me. After a delay, I grabbed it and looked inside.

‘it’s an Aegis Eye. If you ever need help, consider this a one-time use lifeline. Me and my brethren will be on standby for you, wherever you may be, and whatever you may need help with.’ He explained.

I looked from the device back at him: ‘Why?’

He took his hood off and came closer to me: ‘I have eyes everywhere. I know that the astral swordsman has given you that powerful toy that makes you invincible. Figured, a needless enemy is an enemy not worth having. So let’s hope this starts us off on good terms.’

‘Awfully generous of you. But, Jo doesn’t trust you, why should I?’ I asked.

He chuckled: ‘You shouldn’t. You never should. I get paid for spreading lies and killing the ones who believe them. Trusting me is the same as digging your own grave.’

‘Is that a threat?’ I asked cynically.

‘No. More of a heads-up.’ He answered.

‘I’m not afraid of you, Ryo Bin.’

‘I don’t ask you to be. I too am not afraid of you. But that doesn’t mean that I shouldn’t have respect for you. You’re an admirable foe after all. And as much as I would accept any contract requesting your head, I am not an idiot. If there’s anything I’ve learned from Mar’Keth, is that enemies are just barriers between you and your goal. Treat them so, and your fear will dissipate. Though, it seems like we are not enemies, Vai Elebor Dani.’ He went for a handshake after finishing his sentence, which I had accepted with one of my own.

I looked back at the grave: ‘How do you know who I am?’

But his was gone, disappeared without a trace. I remember this day very well, one that had been kept secret from everyone, figured telling others wouldn’t help.

‘So are we breaking out?’ Valikath asked.

‘No, well yes, but not in the way you want to do it.’ I replied.

‘Why? What do they matter to you? Just mere insects under your boot.’ He exclaimed.

‘You know, Valikath, I think that is what differentiates me from you. All you think of is how to progress at the cost of others’ lives. You can’t do that!’ I told him.

He paused for a moment before continuing:
‘Looks like someone has changed their ways.’

‘I’m not a tyrant like you, I’d say I had a good teacher to act as a good example of what not to be.’ I replied.

Seconds after, I heard a heavy metal door clanking from down the hall, left of the cell I was locked in. By the sound of the boots, I figured that someone was making their way down the hall, eventually reaching my cell and halting.

‘Vai Elebor Dani, you have been convicted for murder in cold blood and illegal use of outlander magic on the territory of R’Oth Vilgmeri. Seeing as you are not a Vilgmeri by nationality, you do

not fall under the primary protection laws of the kingdom of R'Oth Vilgmeri. This results in free-form punishment allowance, hence your penalty is death by hanging. Do you have any questions?' He read off his lengthy paper.

'When is my final day?' I asked.

The officer looked up at me: 'Today.'

The response was blunt, but not unexpected. The problem was getting out of here, without killing anyone. I knew that if I let Valikath take over, this place would be a bloodbath, thus I had to do everything on my own. Whatever Ryo Bin had given me, was my key out of this prison.

After the officer had left, I cast hammer form, breaking through the metal bars. Other convicts started making noise the moment they saw me leave my cage, yelling to free them as well. I sprinted down the hallway and was met with the giant metal door. I immediately cast wisdom form and blasted through it, creating a giant hole, behind which were dumbfounded guards with spears in hand.

‘Patho! Breach! Breach!’ One started yelling, alerting others in the presence.

They grabbed their spears and pointed them at me, yelling to stay back. I lifted my hands in response and tried reasoning with them:

‘Hey, hey! Don’t do anything risky! I do not want to hurt you!’ I yelled.

One of them lowered his weapon and inspected me.

‘Hja’Patho!, Vai Al’Io!’ He screamed.

I didn’t understand much of Vilgmeri, but I did understand what he said, he warned others that I was Vai. This meant that they knew who they were dealing with.

‘Return to your cell, criminal!’ Another yelled.

‘I will not! It is for your safety and well-being! I am in possession of a terrible soul, who wants nothing but destruction. Lest you want to be destroyed momentarily, I suggest letting me go.’ I explained.

They look at one another in confusion. After a moment, they moved to the sides, clearing the

way, after which I slowly started moving forward, keeping my hands up.

After I had moved a significant distance from the guards, I started sprinting towards the next room, where my equipment was kept. The problem was the armored door which kept it locked away.

‘Finally, some destruction!’ I heard Valikath say.

‘No need.’ I answered, and stretched out my arms, after which I formed a rectangle, sliced my hand through it, reached forward, and formed a fist. A moment later, I felt light, and could no longer feel my feet touching the ground, I had become ethereal, now able to move through solid matter, I floated through the door, and regained my flesh.

‘Impressive. When did you learn that?’ Valikath asked.

‘I’ve read your studies.’ I replied.

Then I realized that someone was sitting to my right, it was the keeper. He gazed at me in great distress, probably wondering what just had happened.

I nodded at them and asked where my gear may be, they sat there in shock with their hands up. I sighed and started looking through the lockers.

Eventually, I found my satchel, containing the Aegis Eye. I took it out and held it in my hands. I inspected it, searching for a way to activate it, but couldn't do so. I suddenly hit my finger on something, which collapsed the eye, and started producing ticking noises. Then, it started vibrating and after a while stopped completely. I thought that I had done something wrong, so I dropped the device and dashed out of the door.

As I sprinted, I searched my satchel for the bags of dust given to me by Wu, but alas they weren't there. I had no other option but to escape through the main entrance, it took too much strength to shift through walls like I did earlier.

I was close to the main entrance, a stairway led up towards the main hall, which was guarded by two guards. They noticed me at the bottom of the stairs and started moving towards me slowly, but a second later, both of them got snatched away and disappeared out of sight.

Confused, I approached the main hall, wondering where the guards had gone off. Once I reached the top, both the guards were lying on the floor, senseless. I walked by them into the main hall, which was empty. It was weird, seeing as there was a ton of personnel walking around when they brought me in.

I walked over to the door and opened it, leading to the open grounds, where carriages were parked. I looked around, but not a living soul in sight. The entrance was surrounded by a low stone wall, in front of which was another layer of tall bushes. I moved toward the only way out of here, and halfway through, I noticed movement behind the vegetation. Eventually, they came into view, and stood there with hands behind their back, staring at me.

‘Ryo Bin?’ I said out loud, confused.

‘I hope we weren’t too late?’ He said.

I had realized that by now, more of his assassins were surrounding me.

‘So, the eye worked?’ I asked.

He nodded: ‘Of course.’

‘But, how did you manage to do all this?’

‘Me?’ He said, ‘I’d never do this that quick on my own. We did it, as promised.’

‘Did you kill them?’ I asked.

‘Some. Only those who refused to collaborate.’
He answered.

‘And who collaborated?’

‘No one.’ He said.

I couldn’t believe my ears, had they really killed everyone?

He then chuckled: ‘Worry not, we have not killed anyone, at most knocked them out. The rest were bribed. A common practice here in Vilgmeri.’

I looked at him relieved: ‘Thank you.’

He smiled: ‘You’ve changed your ways, I respect that.’

‘What?’ I questioned.

But he was gone, and so were his assassins.

‘What a strange man.’ I said to myself, moving out and running toward the tavern.

After about ten minutes of running, I had arrived at the back alley next to the jewelry store, about seven minutes from the tavern. There, I was stopped in my tracks. An unknown figure came out of the shadows, and stood in the middle of the alley, looking at me. They wore a hood, leather gloves, and a long jacket. They then removed their hood, revealing their face.

‘What? Raim? What are you doing here?’ I asked.

Raim didn’t answer me. Instead, he snapped his fingers...

Chapter 11: King of Nothing

His sword flew towards me at an immense speed, I could barely keep track of it. I dodged out of the way, as he dashed in and tried punching me, which avoided by pushing his arm away. He then twirled and threw a kick, at the same time recalling his sword to strike me from behind. I cast wall form, blocking his sword, but getting hit by his kick, which sent me tumbling backward.

‘Halt!’ I yelled. ‘What are you doing, Raim? Are you out of your mind?’

He stood still, watching me from a distance.

‘Am I out of my mind? That’s a question I should be asking you, traitor.’ He barked, recalling his sword to float next to him.

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked concerned. His eyes were lit purple, as they always have, but something was different. He was powered by rage and anger as if someone had set off a fuse, which had reached the explosives.

‘You, decide to use the Astral for what you thought was ‘just’. You first were beating up bad guys, then you decided that that wasn’t enough, thus you started killing instead.’ His tone had gone from calm to loud. ‘Now, you not only side with a traitor to his kin, Valikath, but you also get bailed out by Pumer’s assassin?’

Now I understood. He knew about it, he knew I had Valikath’s soul inside me. But how? Was he following me? Spying on me?

‘Raim, it’s not what you think it is. I am not siding with them, Ryo Bin offered to’ I got cut off.

‘Don’t you dare to mention his name! Your honor, and everything you stood for, now stain the ground. I spit on your values, Vai Elebor Dani.’ He yelled, throwing his sword in my direction again. I quickly stood up and deflected it, casting a spear form in return. He moved around it, dashing at me and kicking me in the stomach. I coughed blood and got pushed into a wall behind me. He then continued to pummel my face with his fists, until I dropped to the ground.

He then moved back, breathing erratically. ‘I have wept, for a decade. Mourning the passing of Pumer and Mar’Keth, blaming it on myself, drinking the pain away. For years, I’ve been teaching you the good morals of a Valomorian student. But you? You decide to throw it all away! Why?’ I could see tears leaking from his eyes. ‘What business did you have with the mindless killer? Or- or why did you start helping Valikath?’

My vision was blurry. I could feel blood on my forehead, streaming down on my eyebrows, dripping on the ground and forming a puddle at my face. My right eye was barely open at this point, the left one barely functioned. Suddenly, a surge of power coursed through me, as I jumped up, and unwillingly cut Raim’s leg from his knee down. Blood spurted out of the cut, which revealed a broken bone and the surrounding muscle tissue. After about two seconds, Raim realized that the lower half of his right leg was gone, and started screaming in excruciating pain. His screams reverberated on the walls of the alleyway, echoing in the distance.

I then walked closer to him and crouched to level my height with his.

‘So, this is the famous Raim Aer? The mind that I couldn’t get through. Fascinating. You know, the mentors of you duelists, are far better at manipulating than me. Can’t contest the mind of one that can’t think freely. But you, you are different my friend. You were truly something special. Shame it has to come to an end this way.’ Valikath said, readying my hand, but he got interrupted by an unsuspecting arrow. It pierced my hand, pushing it away from Raim. I looked over to my left, where the arrow came from, but no one was there. I then felt something in my back, it was a blade, I had gotten stabbed, but couldn’t feel anything. Valikath was in control, I couldn’t do anything to stop him. I turned around and slashed with my hand, creating a wave of astral, which put a dent in the wall behind me.

‘Pesky assassins.’ Valikath said, creating a tear that made me step through. I saw purple, pure astral magic hovering around me, as I traversed time and space with ease, ending up at a

completely isolated area, one I had never seen before, but looked so familiar.

A gate appeared in front of me, which opened on its own, revealing a path, lined with golden decorations, walls covered in paintings and banners. It was as if I was floating, numb. The only thing connecting me with reality was fear, genuine fear for Raim. What had I done? Why did I do that? Why did Valikath do that?

‘You can’t stop thinking about it eh?’ Valikath said. ‘Only the damned throne on your mind. How whimsical.’

He walked forward, leading me down the path that felt like home, one I’d walked before, but I just couldn’t remember. Eventually, we reached the end of the hallway, which led to a heavy wood door. I simply touched it, and it dissipated. Behind it was what I had been chasing for so long now, the throne.

I walked into the room, looking around and taking in the details. It was exactly as I had seen in my visions. The carpet led to a beautiful throne, which had ornaments and golden decorations surrounding it.

‘Where have you taken me?’ I asked.

‘I? This is what you wanted to see.’ Valikath replied. I had noticed that I had regained the ability to function on my own again. All the pain I felt before was now gone. There were no bruises on me anymore, only a heavy feeling of dread.

‘Do not listen to what Raim told you, Vai. Be proud of your ambition! It is the only driving force behind one’s actions. You’ve been waiting to see the throne, now it is all yours.’ He said.

I slowly walked over to the throne, not because I wanted to, but because something in me was telling me to sit on it. As if the throne was calling my name. As if it was meant for me. I felt a faint grin on my face as I approached it. Once I reached it, I started stroking the armrests, feeling its texture. Nothing at first, but moments later it was as if it grasped me, forcing me onto the throne, and I obeyed, taking a seat on it.

The throne felt comfortable, just like I had imagined it. It made me happy and filled me with glee as if I hadn’t nearly killed my dearest friend.

I looked ahead of me, and I couldn't believe my eyes. Valikath stood in front of me, just like I had seen him in my visions.

‘And there you go, a deserved throne, for a great queen.’ He said, kneeling. ‘However, now that you’re seated, let me explain something to you.’

Valikath got up and took his hood off, looking me dead in the eye: ‘You have found nothing. You are not deserving anything, Vai. The astral throne never existed, it was all part of your imagination. Your father was a disappointment, and your mother’s unplanned pregnancy should’ve never happened. You are a mistake, Vai. You are a mere connection for me, between the physical and the inconceivable. All you have been doing has been a mirage to give you hope, to not give up until I had taken full control of your body.’

The smile on my face had left. A sudden feeling of guilt and panic settled in. ‘What?’ I said in disbelief.

‘Why am I telling you this? Because I want you to remain here, trapped in your own mind, like I was once. Except, I want your last feeling to be

sorrow, anguish, and dissonance. I want you to feel incomplete like I have for eighty years. But, I first must thank you. Thank you for bringing me back into this world, and giving me a chance to finish what I'd started eight decades ago. This time, I won't let myself down again. Farewell, grandchild.' He said, walking out of the door, and slamming it behind him.

I screamed and tried getting up from the throne, but I couldn't. It was a trap... It was a trap, and I fell for it. I felt like I was doing something right for once, but I ended up a fool yet again.

Chapter 12: Mayday

Sweat dripped down my back as I continued to thrust, getting real close to my climax, when I suddenly heard someone knocking on the door: ‘Sir Eagle! I come baring news.’

I accelerated my hip thrusts, making Elesma moan loudly, wondering if the sounds were penetrating the walls of the room. After I reached my climax, I kissed her back, as I got up and put on my pants, tightening the belt, and moving toward the door.

When I opened it, Gy’Zin was standing waiting on the other side, waiting patiently. Upon seeing me, he lowered his chin and put his fist against his shoulder, greeting me.

‘My king.’ He said.

‘At ease, Gy’Zin. What’s up?’ I asked.

‘Raim woke up, sir.’ He told me.

I nodded, grabbed my shirt off the floor, and moved out of the room, waving Elesma goodbye.

We continued down the long hallway, which was decorated with golden ornaments and streamlined with expensive diamonds and other minerals of high value. The floor was made of stone, which kept the hallways colder than the rest of the building. The hallway curved into an opening, which had a spiraling staircase leading up.

‘How is he?’ I asked as we ascended.

‘Bad.’ Gy’Zin said, shaking his head. ‘The bleeding has stopped, the wound is sutured, but he’s lightheaded from all the blood he has lost. As per the doctors, he needs to rest a lot and eat frequently to swiftly regain his strength.’

The luck was clearly not on his side, poor guy. What was he getting himself into? He was the one who gave that *thing* to Vai, shouldn’t he know what it is capable of? Why was he trying to stop her in the first place? So many questions made things very unclear and, therefore unpredictable. I was starting to wonder if it was

worth saving her from the prison. She would've indubitably killed them all with ease, but she chose not to. If she has become a pacifist, then why would she attack her friend? Or maybe it wasn't her...

We ascended to the first floor, immediately met with distant screams from the hallway to our left. It was unclear to me why I was helping him, maybe an act of kindness, maybe half expecting him to be in my debt, so I could use him later. Either way, he is in no shape to do anything right now, and his only hope is me.

After about fifteen seconds of walking, I arrived at his room, where the door was swung open. When I looked inside, two of my men were backed up into corners with their hands up, seemingly trying to calm Raim down.

'Hello, old friend.' I said to him, with a grin. His expression changed from anger to... hopelessness. And back to anger in a mere moment.

'Murderer!' He yelled, immediately followed by screams of pain. The screams reverberated in the dark brown room that contained the duelist.

Tears were visible on his cheeks, trailing to his chin. His eyes were purple, darkened by the red web of veins that polluted them. His hair was dark, pulled back into a ponytail. His face was covered with stubble, and spots of blood, probably from touching his face after having touched the leg, which had stopped bleeding, covered in bandages, which were soaked in blood.

‘Do... not come- Agh!’ He screamed.

I shook my head, ordering two of my men, who were guarding him, to restrain him, limiting his movement.

‘Keep still, duelist. Too much movement could open the wound again, let your body recover.’ I instructed. ‘Your leg could not be saved, had to leave it behind, unfortunately. My men are working on a replacement.’

The duelist looked at me, confused: ‘What do you mean a replacement? What are you planning on doing? If you want me dead, then kill me now and spare me the extra suffering.’

I rolled my eyes: ‘Your dramatic expression would’ve made you a good actor, you know? Calm it, we have connections with the Wave Flayers. They’ll get you a peg leg.’

‘Who are Wave Flayers?’ He asked loudly.

‘Pirates.’ I said, leaning against the door frame. ‘They travel the Var Ispar, plundering and looting. We should have one by tomorrow.’

The duelist was struggling to move, breathing heavily, trying to move into a more comfortable position. I noticed him trying to move his right leg, and intervened, holding it down.

‘Do not help me with tools of the pirate filth!’ He yelled at me, spitting left and right.

I chuckled: ‘Comical, *patho yet ’verth aeg tim.*’ I responded. It meant ‘nothing will save it now’. For once I wasn’t lying, his leg couldn’t be saved. If we had gotten there moments later than we did, he’d have died. However, now was not the time to dawdle on thoughts of what could’ve been, I had a task to complete. Once again, these Valomorians had proven that they bring trouble.

Now, I had to search for help, my men and I would never stand a chance against that monster.

‘Gy’Zin, come here.’ I said, taking him out of the room. ‘Listen, I have to go.’

His eyes widened: ‘Sir, do you mean...?’

He knew what I was talking about, and I wasn’t going to undermine the importance of this: Yes. We need assistance. He is our only way to make external connections, maybe gain temporary allies.’

‘Sir, I am coming with you!’ Gy’Zin said swiftly.

‘Of course’ I smiled. ‘You are coming with me, together with Aerithum and Yunga. Gather them and meet me at the docks by noon. We’ll take the first ship to there.’

Gy’Zin nodded, and we parted ways. About three hours later, we had set sail back to R’Oth Vilgmeri. The sun had passed its highest point, illuminating the sea ahead. Calm, but scary nevertheless. I have always hated the sea, just the thought of how deep the bottom could be, always scared me.

‘Sir, may I?’ Aerithum inquired.

‘Of course!’ I answered.

He jumped down from the nest, rolling forward upon impact, regaining his footing in front of me.

‘Sir Eagle, what do you search in Vilgmeri? Do we have a new mission?’ He asked.

I looked at him, putting my hand on his shoulder: ‘No Aerithum, the mission we’re on is way grander than any contract.’

‘Enlighten me, sir.’

I took my hand off and leaned over the board, looking down into the waters.

‘I’m on my way to right my wrong, from a long time ago, Aerithum.’ I explained. ‘I must do it alone, but I need you as my scouts in case I die.’

‘Sir, he who dares to touch your mantle, shall know the sting of my blade. They who wish death upon you will feel its wrath first!’
Aerithum said stoically.

‘Thank you, Aerithum.’ I said with a grin. ‘But this isn’t a fight, it’s my due diligence. Truth is, I’ve been teaching you to never run from your duty, from your oath, while in reality, I have been running from it for ten years.’

He looked with a questioning face: ‘So then, why have you been teaching us that which you do not do?’

‘I don’t know.’ I shrugged. ‘Maybe it’s a way for me to cope with it somehow.’

Aerithum nodded silently and moved back to the chambers. The sails were still, caressed by the soft winds that guided the ship. The captain was steering in full focus, keeping close tabs on the map and his crew, ordering them around. I looked ahead, wondering what would happen next. Would I succeed in conversing with the person I hurt so much? I had no idea, only hope, quite the opposite of what I believe in usually, but I had no other choice.

Hours later, when the sun had hidden itself behind the tall mountains of R’Oth, the bell started chiming: *‘Aey’ha hro thr dordetho R’Oth*

Vilgmeri. Ketherim thom aeth I'Vith jak'jem tjo!
,

The captain yelled out as we arrived at the docks. He informed us that we had arrived, and wished us safe travels.

I lifted the blanket that I had covered myself with to stay warm during the ice-cold night. Immediately feeling the chills, gritting my teeth to withstand the shaking. Moments later, as I was done putting on my shoes, Aerithum, Yunga, and Gy'Zin came out of the chambers, fully dressed and ready to go. I nodded, and they nodded in response, swiftly leaving the board and moving silently through the semi-barren streets of Vilgmeri. The cold breeze stirred worries within me. I was never the superstitious kind, but I never liked cold. My mom used to tell me that nothing good comes from bad weather, better to stay home and warm your bones by the fire, and for once I understood her, I'd have loved to sit by the fire instead of treading through the densely packed dirty streets.

'Sir Eagle.' I heard Yunga speak behind me, she was following Gy'Zin to my right but then

moved closer to my ear. ‘I have a bad feeling about this, sir. Do we have a backup plan? Can we just eliminate everyone?’ She asked in a worried voice.

I shook my head: ‘There is only one way in and out.’ We arrived at the crossroads where the tavern was located. ‘I will go in there together Gy’Zin. They have house rules to leave equipment at the front. We will oblige. This place cannot be disturbed by us, no one stirs trouble, and no one gets killed.’

It sounded like Yunga was about to reply, but she then moved back to her original position. I noticed Gy’Zin from the corner of my eye looking at me, and I knew exactly what he was thinking. I understood what it felt like, to be responsible for someone’s death. Inadvertently, it was my fault, I made him do that. The contract with the sorcerer required me to do so, for efficiency purposes, shame.

‘We have arrived.’ I said in a low voice to my followers. ‘Stay behind. If I don’t return by the time happy hour is over, Gy’Zin will be in

charge, you will follow him without question, understood?’

Aerithum shoved his way forward: ‘Sir Eagle! You never told us that-’ I stopped him.

‘Your devotion is to me and to the name of our guild, Aerithum! You will follow like you have in the past, be it me or one I put in charge, am I understood?’ I said in a harsh tone.

He closed his mouth, and silently nodded: ‘Understood, sir.’

I removed my hood and moved towards the front doors. ‘Drunken Sails’ was written on a wooden board in white paint, which had deteriorated over the years, presumably from the rain. I gave the front doors a firm push, revealing a cozy-lit hall that led to a desk with a tall man behind it, who I had assumed to be the weapons keeper.

‘Good evening,’ I said, moving closer to the desk. ‘Hope I’m not disturbing.’

The man smiled: ‘Of course not! Welcome to Drunken Sails, traveler! Are you new here? Haven’t seen you before.’

I grinned slightly: ‘I am not acquainted with this place, thought might give it a visit since I’m passing by anyways.’

‘Great! Well all I need you to do before letting you pass, is to leave your weapons and any other sharp equipment here with me and sign your name on this paper.’ He said, pointing at a list on the desk, which housed names I had never seen before but recognized their origins.

‘Sure thing.’ I answered, writing down my name and leaving a signature next to it. Afterward, I opened my coat, removing all twelve throwing knives it holstered, followed by the bow that was hanging across my chest along with its quiver. I then crouched down to get a hold of the daggers that were hidden in my boots. I placed all the things on the table, and by the looks on the man’s face, he wasn’t expecting me to carry this much equipment.

‘Wow.’ He exclaimed. ‘Quite the arsenal you’ve got there.’ He swiftly put everything away on the respective racks.

I was about to move into the bar when the man stopped me once more: ‘Uh, sir? That device too please.’ He pointed at my wrist.

I looked down at my watch, and then back at the man: ‘It’s harmless, sir.’

‘Sorry sir, but I am ordered to take everything that may look suspicious or threatening.’ He insisted.

I stretched my arm with an open hand: ‘Trust me, you wouldn’t want to do that.’ I said with a serious face, looking him dead in the eye. I could tell he felt uneasy, nodding and letting me in.

I gathered courage and opened the doors that led to the bar. It was lit brightly by candles and the large fireplace in the back, around which were cozy-looking couches that people were resting on. The windows were damp from the condensation, people were telling, and the clank of the tankards were heard all across the tavern. All sorts of drunk men were dancing to the bard that sang in the corner, others were at the bar or their table, getting drunk. Some had fallen asleep already though the night had just begun. I looked

around, some had noticed me entering, but didn't bat an eye, others were questioning my appearance, I could tell by their eyebrows. Then, in the distance, I noticed the person I was looking for. Dark hair with a slight stubble, light tone of skin with a couple of scars here and there. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up, with a plate of drinks in one hand, handing them out with the others. The lower half was covered with an apron-like cloth, probably protecting his black pants and smooth black shoes, which looked recently polished.

Once he was done handing out the drinks, he shoved the black plate under his right armpit, covering it with his left hand, and talking to one of his customers. I was about to move closer, but something stopped me. It was the feeling of guilt. The man looked happy, satisfied. I knew very well what would happen once he saw me, but I couldn't back off now.

Once he lifted his gaze towards the doors, our eyes met. His smile slowly changed to a frown, and his eyebrows were indicating brewing anger from within. He was dumbfounded, shocked to

the point that he dropped the platter he was holding.

The sound attracted other people's attention to him, and following his gaze, they looked at me. I could see his chin was trembling, he was unaware that others were watching, probably wondering what was going on.

The doors behind me opened, and Gy'Zin entered. I looked at him, noticing that he was on the edge, ready to defend. His eyes were sharp, he'd notice any movement in a slither of a second, I knew I could count on him.

'Good evening, sir Jo'Ori.' I said, bowing slightly. 'I am here to-' I couldn't finish my sentence before he started moving towards me viciously, and when he was within a meter distance, he readied his hands to grab me by my coat. Before he could do that, Gy'Zin pushed him away with a mere tap of his hand.

Gy'Zin was a heavy man, very muscular and tough, even I wouldn't withstand his power.

'Please, listen. I am not here to fight.' I said in a calm voice.

‘Shut up! Shut it! How dare you, how dare you even set foot here? IN MY TAVERN? Who do you think you are? Asking me to listen to you? What else? You want me to forget how you murdered my friend too? How about I worship you as a king whilst we’re at it?’ Jo’Ori yelled.

I noticed some of the clients get up from their table, looking angrily at me. Others were frightened, probably expecting a fight to break out.

‘Please, calm down. I come here to converse with you, there are important matters we must discuss.’ I answered.

‘Matters? What matters is that you get out of here NOW!’ He raised his voice, now screaming.

Gy’Zin moved forward slightly, but I grabbed him by the shoulder, moving him aside: ‘I know that you don’t trust me. I am not asking you to do so, I just want a moment of your attention.’

He shook his head: ‘I spit on your wishes, assassin! Move out before I call Raim to kick you out by force!’

I frowned: ‘I’m afraid that’s not possible. Raim is with us in reh-’

‘WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM!’ He screamed, punching me in the face. I could tell it was an untrained fist, but it hurt nevertheless.

Gy’Zin grabbed him by his throat and pushed him against the nearest wall: ‘Sir say the word and he’ll stop breathing!’

‘Halt! Do not do anything, Gy. Remember what we are here for.’ A lot of clients had left their tables now and surrounded us with very unfriendly faces.

I put my attention back to the tavern keep: ‘Jo’Ori, Raim is hurt. We have bandaged him back at base. We cannot disclose its location, nor when he’ll be able to walk again, his leg was sliced off by Vai.’

His eyes widened in disbelief: ‘What?’

‘We believe that something or someone has taken over her. Something beyond Raim’s strength, and that says something. We should take this conversation somewhere private, it’s

best discussed between four walls.’ I explained.
‘And for the love of gold, let the man go Gy!’

Gy’Zin let go of Jo’Ori. The barkeep corrected his shirt and reluctantly nodded: ‘Follow me.’

‘May my companion follow?’ I asked.

Jo’Ori looked back at him: ‘Who is he?’

‘He is Gy’Zin. My trusty guard.’ I answered.

‘One responsible for your friend’s death.’

Gy’Zin suddenly barked.

I turned to him: ‘Stop antagonizing him! Keep your mouth shut unless I tell you otherwise.’

‘Sorry, sir Eagle.’ He said, looking down at the floor.

‘On second thought, maybe he should stay behind. I’m sure he could use a drink.’ I said, looking at Jo’Ori.

I ordered him to stay at the bar, while Jo’Ori indicated to his clients that they may continue drinking as usual, leading me upstairs to his chambers.

Chapter 13: Other Side

‘So, you’re telling me that Vai was the reason Raim lost his leg?’ Jo’Ori asked me in disbelief.

The stench in his office was dense and smelled of wet wood. Some areas on the walls had deteriorated, and I wondered if any rats resided in the depths of dark areas in this establishment. The sound of a glass bottle filled with kjoithita, hitting the surface of the wooden table reverberated in the room, along with the large gulp the barkeep took from his glass. The drink is very potent and strong, which was noticeable by the way he let a fourth of the glass spill on the ground when drinking.

‘Isn’t that pretty strong stuff?’ I asked.

He shook his head: ‘It won’t kill me.’

I agreed and took a sip of it myself. ‘Ahja patho eh!’ I yelled after guzzling down the entire glass. ‘Kicks like a gallavant.’

‘Not for the faint of heart. Now, the information please.’

I leaned closer, coughing in between from the spicy taste of the beverage. ‘Listen, I am just as lost as you are. I do not concern myself with the business of the astrals.’

‘Yet you took Raim in.’ He answered, with his head facing down on the table, his forehead held up by his arm. ‘You know, I hate you. But as much as I try, I cannot bring myself to come to terms with the fact that you have little humanity in you. But I cannot seem to forgive what you did to Pumer.’

I was stunned. I wanted to answer, yet didn’t know what to answer in the first place. He had every right to hate me, in every possible way, but he chose to remain human. I guess, this is what really differentiated us.

‘Raim is a tough guy. What I did to your friend-’

‘Pumer.’ I got interrupted. ‘His name was Pumer.’

‘Pumer.’ I continued. ‘I cannot forgive myself for it. Truth be told, you shouldn’t. I was doing my job, and he got caught in the crossfire. But enough about the past. Lest we’re planning on

succumbing to the freak's power, I suggest we look for options.'

He finally looked up, looking out of the window that was located to his left. The dimly lit alleyways were barren, silent as the night.

'Who are we looking for?' He asked, pouring another round of drinks.

'I don't know. Thought you might know the answer to that.' I replied.

He chuckled: 'Are you doing this to save your own men?'

'Yes.' I said without hesitation. 'Why? I thought that was obvious.'

Jo'Ori slammed the table as he got up, shoving the chair backward: 'Why? Your men are a thousand times more trained than anyone I know, including myself. How do you expect me to gather reinforcements for you?'

I planted my face into the palm of my hand, while trying to comprehend what he was insinuating.

‘This work is tough, deadly. Putting my men’s lives in danger like sheep for slaughter is the last thing I’d want to do.’ I said in a low tone.

‘Thus you’d like me to gather them for you instead? You know that they are human too. Soldiers, bandits, warriors, none are different than your men. You lack perception, assassin.’ He yelled.

‘Perception?’ I asked, lifting my face from my hand. ‘Psh, perception doesn’t pay my men. Perceptive people fall under my blade and fail to perceive their demise. When you build an empire in the clouds, my dear Jo’Ori, the least of your worries are those who can perceive it, it’s those who would combat Aykos and drag their soul across the afterlife to destroy what you have built. And the latter, I’m afraid, is who Valikath seems to be.’ I explained.

He didn’t seem to have an answer, thus I got up and moved over to the window. The harbor was clearly visible from here, how the ships were being unloaded, and how some left the docks to embark on their journey.

‘Look Jo’Ori, I don’t have the time for this. The problem concerns both of us, not just you. Your guy is at our place, that girl is somewhere, probably wreaking havoc, and you are here drinking your time away.’ I exclaimed. ‘Unless we find someone who can help us out, preferably an army, we won’t be able to do this on our own.’

I went back to the table, and leaned over, while Jo’Ori held his chin with his fist, deep in thought. At that moment, I felt something weird, some strange power covering me. I felt enshrouded as if the entire room had become denser than it already was. Breathing became more difficult, to the point of choking. I looked at the barkeep, and judging by his eyes, he felt the same way.

‘How peculiar.’ We heard a voice say from one of the dark corners of the room. The light didn’t reach there, but I could see a silhouetted figure, standing, no, leaning against the wall. What a time it was to not be armed. I was, however, ready to activate my watch, in case anything happened.

The silhouette moved forward, walking toward us, until it eventually was unveiled in the light of the lantern.

‘I suppose I could be of use, hm?’ It was a pale-looking man, with no shirt, wearing only a coat that covered everything but his chest. He wore black leather pants, and wrapped around him was a strange weapon-like thing. He was almost the same height as me, but somehow I felt smaller in comparison. He emitted some aura that I couldn’t see, but could feel. Something that made me want to worship him, like a voice in my head, constantly chanting to succumb to his power.

‘W-who are you?’ Jo’Ori asked, stuttering.

The man chuckled: ‘You have a beautiful face, both of you actually. But, sadly, I am not here for you. I hear you guys have bigger problems to deal with.’ The man took a nearby chair and placed it at the table, its back facing us.

‘Is he with you?’ The barkeep asked.

I shook my head: ‘Never seen him.’

‘Consider yourselves lucky. From those who have seen me, rarely anyone survives. I have felt a disturbance. Some soul escaped the afterlife and is now walking among the population. Rarely does this kind of a thing happen, even rarer for it slip by Dorothumb unnoticed.’

My eyes widened: ‘Dorothumb? Someone had a large dose of eskva mushroom spores, has the guy talking about the sentinels.’

The man suddenly appeared in front of me in the blink of an eye, his hand touching my chest. I felt fear, true fear for once, before losing sight and being transported through what looked like a nebula, a palette of colors, all mixed together, forming some indistinguishable painting.

The next few seconds, felt like hours of excruciating pain. I saw images and felt things I knew I wasn’t supposed to feel. Death, life, serenity, and happiness, all passed by until only a void remained. I felt myself drifting through the abyss, lighter than air, trying to comprehend what was happening, but alas no matter how hard I tried, my mind wouldn’t follow.

After that, silence. Nothingness. And then, everything went back to normal. My sight returned and so did my feelings. After the realization, I pushed myself away, hitting my back against a wall, while keeping my eyes fixed on the strange man.

‘His death is distant, Eizim. It will be as you will it.’ He said, staring into my eyes. ‘I will help you. You cannot do this without me I suppose. Thus, I will assist you. However, there is no saving a soul, without taking one. He who is willing will be the next to expand my wardrobe. As to who it is, is up to you to decide.’

After he said that, dark rays of what looked like magic formed around him, and in a second, he disappeared.

‘What was that- who was that?’ Jo’Ori asked.

Both of us were left speechless. We had support from someone, something we didn’t understand. Some kind of a force beyond human comprehension. Whatever it was, it was deadly, I could feel it. Its way of talking, its behavior, it was clearly some powers we couldn’t afford to

mess with. Fortuitous time to gain more allies, I suppose.

‘Did you see that too?’ I finally asked the barkeep.

He looked at me confused: ‘Did I see what?’

I shook my head: ‘Nevermind. I must head out now.’

I regained my strength and moved over to the door, opening it and realizing that I suddenly felt much better now that the man was gone.

‘So, are we good?’ I asked Jo’Ori on my way out.

‘No.’ He said with a firm expression. ‘We will never be good. However, for the sake of mutual interest, I will provide to the best of my ability to aid you in combat if necessary.’

I nodded and was about to head out when he halted me: ‘And one more thing. You better take good care of Raim. I want him to return safely.’

I went downstairs. After reaching the ground floor, I noticed that a bunch of the customers surrounded Gy’Zin at the bar where he was

drinking. I was surprised that a fight didn't break out.

I whistled in a high pitch, indicating that we were moving out. Gy'Zin immediately got up and turned around to move toward me, but a large and muscular man blocked his way.

'Where do you think you're going?' He said, spitting on Gy'Zin's boot. 'You are not going away until I tell you so.'

The man swung at Gy, hitting him in the face. Gy'Zin recoiled and looked directly at me. I sighed, and showed my index and middle finger, indicating that he was clear to engage, but no more than two hits if possible. He nodded and tried moving forward again, but when the man was about to take another swing, Gy punched him directly in the throat, forcing the man to throw the punch. Gy grabbed his arm, pulled him toward the bar, and slammed his forehead into it, dropping him to the ground, senseless.

Doing so, made the rest move out of his way, clearing the path to the doors that led outside. He moved over, we grabbed our gear on the way out, and met up with the rest outside.

My two scouts immediately started walking in the same direction we were, blending in with the environment. Once we were in a more secluded and dark area, they met up with us, acting naturally.

‘Did it work, sir?’ Yunga asked me from behind.

‘I think so. But things seem to be more complex than we thought. Let us return to the injured duelist and figure things out from there.’ I replied, hurrying my step to get on the last ship leaving for Gilded Juval.

Chapter 14: Process of Elimination

‘Dark powers?’ Wesser asked, squeezing his eyebrows together, trying to make sense of what I was telling him.

I nodded in response: ‘I know it sounds crazy, I just... I don’t know what to do.’

A chilling silence settled in the room. The sun shone through the large window, illuminating the room, and making each dust particle visible. The sound of his pencil on the paper was borderline deafening, and the croaking of the floorboards in the hallway was distracting. In that moment, I could see a drop of sweat on Wesser’s forehead, before he wiped it off to his brow, and got wiped with a thin piece of cloth.

‘What is bothering you, Ryo?’ He asked with a concerned face.

I stood up from the chair, looking through the large window at the docks, where the ships docked at unloaded cargo.

‘I fear.’ I answered, seemingly interrupting my own thought process.

He chuckled: ‘Fear? The mighty Ryo? Never heard of that before.’

‘For the first time. I felt it for the first time. The man touched my chest, and as if by a thrust of a spear, I lost all consciousness. Colors flew past, I didn’t know what was going on.’ I explained.

‘After that, silence. My vision returned.’

I moved back to the chair, taking a seat and leaning closer to Wesser: ‘He has the ability to see my... future? Or something like that, I don’t know.’

Wesser closed his book, taking his glasses off and rubbing his left eye. Afterward, he put them on the small wooden table next to him and looked at me.

‘Ryo tell me, are you looking for sympathy or empathy?’ He asked in a cold tone.

I looked at him, confused: ‘Hja patho is the difference?’

‘Depending on which one you’re here for, you’re either looking for someone who can comfort you, ease your mind or someone who can understand you.’ He said.

‘You do both, don’t you? Isn’t that what I pay you for?’ I asked a little annoyed.

‘I’m a psychologist, Ryo. I act as a bridge between you and knowledge. Knowledge holds the key to that which you want to understand.’ He said in a low, soothing voice.

I swung my hand wildly upwards: ‘Don’t act like you know me!’

‘I have done this for as long as you’ve been alive. Once you have done a job for as long as I have, people start becoming taxonomic. You are no different than many others, and you have yet to understand that, Ryo.’ Wesser responded.

My mind started to flow adrift by the time he finished his sentence, noticing the dust that coated one of the many shelves in the chamber. It was then I started thinking about Elesma, my assistant. She helps me keep things organized, so that I may lead the guild correctly and without

hiccups. The main problem is that I haven't been able to talk to her in a while, about anything guild-related at all. We've been having intimate relations but I've been scared to admit to her that I feel more than just physical attraction, that I'm aiming for something bigger. Yet, it feels like a commitment that I'm not ready for, then again, when will I be?

'Ryo?' I heard a faint voice calling my name.

I swiftly turned my head to look at Wesser:
'Yeah?'

After a short delay, he continued: 'Have you consulted any doctors as of late?'

I frowned in confusion: 'No. Why?'

He shuffled through a stack of papers that were piled up on the table, until he pulled out a yellow folder which contained a bunch more documents.

'I have here your last examination results, which took place five years ago. It states that you've been forgetful in the past, have had the inability to focus or prioritize, and have been lacking attention. However, you have an excellent

memory and are very well-versed in strategy. You have a very keen eye for detail and once focused on something, you rarely lose it. How come? I mean logically speaking, your behavior is sporadic, yet you are a brilliant assassin. Doesn't that raise questions for you?' He questioned.

He did have a point. I never really stopped to think about it, but now that he mentions it, something just doesn't click. It feels like I'm losing touch with myself sometimes, losing focus and questioning my ability to lead the guild.

'I'm fine, Wesser. I have no need for another examination.' I barked.

'I'm worried for your health, Ryo.' He said.

'I don't pay you to worry about my health, I pay you to listen and understand.'

'I see.' He said, leaning back into his chair. 'So you are seeking empathy after all.'

I placed my hands on my sides and looked down at the floor, trying to focus my mind on the

conversation. ‘I need the meds you’ve been prescribing me. I ran out of them yesterday.’

‘No.’ Wesser said stoically, writing something in his journal. ‘I cannot do that, for the sake of your health.’

‘Why?’ I asked curiously. ‘They’ve been helping me.’

‘That medication contains jaika mushroom stems, which when fused with other ingredients help lock your mind onto specific tasks. However, the stems contain vermid, which is toxic. Last I heard, the scientists have been working on reducing toxicity if not completely removing it, thus I cannot grant you more until I know for sure that the medication has been made safer.’ He explained.

‘So it helps me, yet also kills me slowly at the same time? Why’d you give it to me in the first place then?’ I asked, a little irritated.

He finished jotting something down in his journal and looked up: ‘In small doses, the toxicity is almost harmless, but the substance has proven to arise addictive behavior. The more you

consume it, the more dangerous it becomes. I wanted you to try it without harming yourself in the process.'

I shook my head, wondering what to do next. The first thing on my list was to find out more about this weird ally of ours, and then figure out what he meant by taking a soul in return. I needed to understand how dangerous he was and what he could potentially do for us.

'Alright. Next month, same day?' I asked.

He nodded: 'Always here when you need me, sir Eagle.'

'Don't call me that.' I insisted. 'Sounds stupid.'

He chuckled: 'Isn't that what all your assassins call you?'

'You are twice my age, if anything I should be calling you by your title. Doctor Eigersmind just sounds too formal.' I said, waving my hand around in gestures. 'I'll see you then.'

Sometime later, I arrived at the entrance of the guild building, which was hidden in the basement of an abandoned building. From there,

I took a right, and further down the hall, which led to an open area, diverging in different ways. Everyone there was moving around in constant motion, but halted when they saw me.

‘Sir Eagle!’ They yelled in unison, holding their fist up to their shoulder

‘At ease!’ I yelled out and moved further down the hallway, where the stairs were located. On the way there I was in constant thought of who I should sacrifice to that weird guy. Was it even needed? What was his deal anyway? Even if he was an important figure, why should I listen to him? At that moment, Aerithum appeared in front of me.

‘Sir Eagle!’ He yelled, greeting me with the gesture.

‘At ease. Aerithum, perfect timing. I need you to go out on a mission.’ I said.

‘At once sir! What must I do?’ He asked.

‘I need you to gather as much information about someone. I don’t know his name, but he’s a male, very pale, wearing barely any clothing. A strange mist surrounds him, which allows him to

reposition to his will. You think you can do that for me?’

‘That’s what I specialize in, sir. Will be done.’
He answered, dashing toward the exit.

The air in the hallway was stale, blending in with the smell of blood, and that’s when it hit me, Raim. I ran upstairs as fast as I could, rushing over to the chambers he was held in. Getting closer, I heard groans, wondering if he’s been hurting still. Once I got my eyes on him, he was up, slowly moving around together with one of the doctors.

‘You’ve got this, Raim. Just a little more.’ He said.

I realized that Raim was being trained to walk around with a newly installed wooden pegleg. He was managing really well, taking one step at a time, trying to adjust to the new leg.

‘Looks great on you!’ I said with a grin.

He looked at me disapprovingly: ‘Could’ve done it without this wooden thing.’

‘Oh, what? You telling me that you guys can grow ‘astral legs’ too?’

‘Why are you helping me?’ He asked in a slightly aggressive tone.

‘I need you, alive.’ I said. ‘Your accomplice, Vai, is in danger and needs help.’

He leaned on the doctors, while he helped him sit down on the nearby chair. He slowly sat down with an uneasy expression on his face, indicating that he was in pain.

‘Is she alright?’ He asked eventually.

I moved in closer, took another chair, and sat across him: ‘I don’t know. After your battle with her, she snapped and went wild. We managed to distract her, but then she disappeared in a tear of some sort.’

Raim shook his head: ‘I can’t believe it. It’s my fault...’

I looked confused: ‘What do you mean?’

He had his thumb and index planted deep into his eyesockets, with his other hand visibly shaking.

‘I was angry. When I heard that she had gotten put into prison, I wanted to bail her out with the money I had collected. When I got there, I saw her talking to you, surrounded by your assassins. Seeing you guys on good terms sent me into a fury, thus I left. I waited on her, knowing she’d appear, and tried teaching her a lesson. I was judgemental and close-minded. It’s all my fault.’ When he finished his sentence, tears were streaming down his cheeks. There was sweat on his brow and his face was red.

‘There’s something else too.’ I started. ‘Some... apparition of sorts, a pale man engulfed in shadows. I’m in the process of finding out who it is but as for now-’

‘Macijek A’Vak.’ Raim interrupted me.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘The apparition. A pale man, wearing black clothing engulfed in black mist. It’s Macijek, the servant of death itself.’ He explained.

I chuckled: ‘Death? Tsh, thought that was something with the... Ekos and Doro-something?’

‘No, Macijek follows the lead of a Harrdmindorian god. Aykos and Dorothum do too. The difference is that the two are sentinels, Macijek is a physical servant, a way for the god of death to be in touch with the physical realm.’ Raim said.

I got up and moved around the room, rubbing my face: ‘How do you know this?’

Raim looked up at me: ‘Mar’Keth told me about it once.’

I could feel my eyes enlarge. I froze as if I had seen a ghost, quickly shutting them and looking down, regaining my train of thought.

‘Yeah, alright. Servant of death. And I’m the king of Juval. And stop it with the Aykos and Dorothum, they don’t exist! Don’t tell me that you believe in them.’ I said with slight annoyance.

Hurried footsteps echoed in the hallway behind me, further elevated by the sounds of heavy breathing. People were running. I quickly left the chamber and looked at where the sounds were coming from. Upon inspection, I noticed

three men running toward me: Yunga, Phora, and Den.

‘Sir! Sir!’ I heard Yunga yell while getting closer to me. ‘We have a rogue.’

I pushed my eyebrows together: ‘What?’

A rogue? Among my men? How can this be? I always treat them with respect and love, what would drive them to this?

‘Who is it?’ I asked, angry.

Yunga looked at the others, then back at me and momentarily at the ground: ‘Aerithum, sir.’

Shock overtook me. I’d never think of Aerithum as a traitor.

‘What did he do?’

‘He left a letter on the door of his bedchambers, stating that he’s planning on taking his chances, inviting me to go with him to the stated location.’ Yunga explained.

‘You didn’t go?’ I asked surprised.

‘No, sir. My blood for the guild and you.’ She exclaimed.

A sister against her brother, what a surprise. I wonder if Aerithum will try to neutralize Yunga then. ‘Alright.’ I said quietly. I’ll head to my office, Yunga you come with me. Den you’ll keep an eye on Raim and report to me if he needs anything. Phora, you will send out a hunting party after Aerithum and eliminate him.’

Everyone nodded and went to do their jobs, while Yunga followed me. Moments later, we reached my office, where I had stored everyone’s contracts. I searched for Aerithum’s contract, but couldn’t find it for a while. I was never good at keeping things clean, always a mess. But, eventually, I found it and tore it in half. From now on, Aerithum was no longer a part of the guild. I then started writing a letter stating that any sighting of Aerithum should be reported and he should be eliminated. Once I finished, I got up from my chair and moved toward Yunga, and at that moment, I heard a very familiar sound. Yunga was about to move closer but I halted her.

‘Do not move.’ I yelled.

‘Are you alright, sir?’ She asked.

I indicated to be quiet, and she obeyed. After a moment, a vague sound resembling ticking was to be heard.

‘Patho.’ I exclaimed. ‘Motion bombs. Erpatho trapped my office.’

‘Using your training against you. Clever.’ Yunga mentioned.

‘Not clever enough. The bomb detonation relies on a force strong enough to push its fuse into ignition.’ I started moving very slowly, carefully inspecting the ground for wires. ‘There it is.’ I said when I found the wire. ‘Hidden, but not hidden enough. The wire is already slightly bent, ensuring that not as much force is needed to trigger the explosion. Clever, Aerithum.’

I followed the wire, which led to a hidden place beneath my desk, one where I wouldn’t think of searching or checking. I gently took the wire off the hook of the bomb, then slowly twisted the fuse trigger in the opposite direction, defusing it.

‘There.’ I said, letting out a big sigh of relief. ‘I got it.’

Yunga was standing as still as a statue. After reassuring her that I had disarmed the trap, she moved backward, out of the office room.

‘Sir, if he trapped your room, he might’ve trapped other rooms too. We should stay vigilant.’ Yunga exclaimed.

I shook my head: ‘Negative. No reports of explosions from within the compound. Setting up a motion bomb takes a while, without prep time it’s nearly impossible to rig more than one small room. Besides, if there’s one person he’d want to kill, it’d be me.’

Yunga looked concerned: ‘Why do you think he wants you dead?’

‘I don’t know.’ I said in a whispering voice. ‘I wish to find out, but he has the same gift as you Yunga, the hunter’s eye. The only other person that can combat him, is you.’

Yunga nodded decisively: ‘I will go after him, sir.’

I placed my hand on her shoulder: ‘Are you sure, Yunga? We don’t know what his intentions may be.’

‘Matters not, sir.’ She answered immediately. ‘I wish to find out why he’s doing this. I’ll be back by dusk.’

‘For the guild!’ I said, placing my fist on my shoulder.

‘For the guild!’ She replied and ran off.

I returned to Raim to check how he was doing. When I arrived at his chambers, I noticed Den sitting against the wall in the hallway. I approached him, seeing that his torso was cut in half, with blood spilled on the ground and the portion of the wall next to him covered in it. His guts were half dangling from his stomach. The sight startled me, making me tumble backward. A heavy feeling in my stomach settled in, it pushed further to my throat, burning me from the inside, and making me want to vomit. I shuffled to my feet, entering the chamber. The doctor’s torso was sat on a chair, headless and Raim’s body lay on the ground, lifeless.

‘W-what?’ I trembled.

Chapter 15: Borrowed Time

I opened my eyes to a hazy vision. It was as if I had drank ten steins of beer and woken up to a headache and confusion. I looked around slowly, taking in my surroundings. To my despair, the room hadn't changed. I was still tied to that same throne, unable to move, barely able to think at all. Further in the endless distance, I saw a figure lying on the ground. It was difficult to distinguish them since my vision wasn't all there, but after a while, I regained it a bit, recognizing the figure immediately. A brown hood with a purple shirt and black pants, it was Raim. What was he doing here? I tried yelling, but no sound came from my mouth. It was as if I had been muted.

'Poor soul.' I heard a voice beside me. It was Valikath, who had walked from behind me.

'Bastard!' I wanted to yell, but nothing came out.

'Such harsh words, Vai.' He replied.

I was confused about how he could hear me even though no words were spoken.

‘We are linked to one another, I can hear your thoughts, you can hear mine.’ He explained.

‘Beautiful isn’t it? Mind cage, surely you must’ve missed a page if you didn’t know about this trick Vai. Raim cannot hear you, there is a barrier separating you. Unfortunately, you are unable to move, thus unable to cross the barrier. But don’t worry, I’ll do it for you.’ He said with a slight chuckle.

‘Stay away from him!’ I screamed, but to no avail.

Valikath slowly moved forward, creating ripples in the air the moment he crossed the mind cage borders. He continued further until he reached Raim, crouching next to him. It was then that Raim woke up.

‘Hello Raim.’ Valikath engaged.

Raim jolted back: ‘Who are you? And where am I?’

It looked like he was trying to get up but couldn't do it, as if being held down by something.

'You are in a place isolated from the world, Raim. I welcome you, you may call me Uncle Vali, or if you hate me enough, Valikath.' He said with a mischievous smile.

'You monster!' Raim yelled, trying to go for a punch, unable to move his arm.

'What did you do to me? Release me right now!'

Valikath laughed: 'Or what? I am king here. You are merely my puppet.'

'I would succumb to *jatve* than have to serve you.' Raim barked.

'Ooh, Vilgmeri slang? You have lost the last of Valomor that remained in you. Pathetic.'

Valikath said, moving closer to Raim. 'Vai gave in, she didn't want the pain and suffering to continue, thus she pledged her service to me.'

'Keep lying, old man!' Raim yelled.

'Oh, am I?' Valikath said, snapping his fingers. Suddenly, an apparition of me formed next to

him. The apparition looked at Raim in the eyes and spoke: ‘Raim, I am no longer of service to you, nor your beliefs. I do not believe in peace the way you do, Valikath guides us to the correct path.’

Raim remained silent for a little but spoke after: ‘This isn’t you speaking, Vai. I know that you don’t believe in what you say. Listen to yourself, unchain yourself from this burden, Vai. Please!’

‘You are stuck in the past, Raim. Valikath understands the world far better than us. He needs me to succeed, he needs followers, people who believe in his will. A world where astral magic is prominent, and High Valomor is no longer looked down upon. A place where people can be themselves, without the need for war or a need to prove themselves.’ The doppelganger replied.

‘No Vai! That’s exactly what he’s doing! He’s proving himself to the others, he’s trying to show his might, lead others under the rule of tyranny!’ Raim screamed.

‘Tyranny is a concept only those who are terrified of change believe in. If fear guides you,

Raim, then what difference does it make, who leads the people? Do you ever wonder what you really want? Have you ever taken the time to think? Use your head for a little.’ Valikath replied in a calming tone.

With a snap of his fingers, the doppelganger dissipated in thin air. Valikath wants Raim to succumb to rage and anger, and attack him when he’s most vulnerable. Valikath wouldn’t fight Raim on fair terms, he’s too scared. It was then that Valikath reappeared next to me.

‘Look at him, confused about his feelings. You are right, you know, about me not wanting to fight him. I possess the greatest power known to man, but he surpasses my talent, Vai. Something you failed to realize when fighting him. However, I won’t attack him. He’ll tear himself apart, blaming himself for losing you. Pity, humans are so weak. Astral magic is where our power lies, Vai.’

‘You are a twisted man, Valikath. I spit on your ideals and your name.’ I thought.

‘Wouldn’t make you the only one.’ Valikath replied, with a sigh. ‘Listen Vai. We are High

Valomorians, which makes us more than humans, it makes us wielders of astral magic. When I was alive, I was attempting to save lives by sacrificing those who wouldn't be missed, those who didn't contribute anything to society. They called me a madman too, and much like you, weren't willing to listen to my ideas.'

'You owe nothing to anyone, nor does anyone owe a thing to you! You are a grain of sand amidst a desert, your death forged no sandstorm, nor did it cause a cataclysm. Your death now will be no different either.' I transmitted my thoughts to him.

He chuckled: 'And that's where you're wrong. I don't have the weakness of the flesh, instead I use yours as my means of traversal. I am essentially omnipresent, both in the physical realm and in your head. You cannot do anything without my approval and will. You are my puppet, and I will show you the grand finale of my work!'

He then crouched in front of me, abstracting the view of Raim in the distance, and instead forcing me to look at him.

‘You’ve read my work, right?’ He whispered, raising his open hand palm, from which a strange purple energy came.

‘Siphoning form, really?’ I said, unimpressed.

‘No.’ He said laughing, ‘It is so much more.’ He pulled his hand backward, releasing the energy onto my body, making me feel dizzy and sick in the stomach. My vision was hazy for a moment, but then it returned, and I felt light as a feather.

Looking around me I saw the same room I was trapped in, but once I glanced behind, I was shocked beyond belief. It was my body. I had been dragged out of my corporeal form, and was now in the hands of Valikath, like a puppet.

‘It is, so much more Vai.’ He said satisfied.

‘What have you done to me?’ I said with a panicking tone.

‘Relieved you from your bodily needs. Do you understand now? Do you understand that what we are? Who we can become? It is obvious, Vai! We are superior!’ He yelled out.

Moments later, I opened my eyes, and all had gone back to normal. I was back in my body, however this time I could move around freely, meaning that I was no longer trapped in that throne.

‘Welcome back.’ Valikath said, looking out into the black nothingness.

I stretched my limbs and felt good being able to move again after all that time. I felt a sudden urge to attack him, but he was in control, resistance would be futile.

‘Smart.’ He exclaimed, with no further explanation.

‘Why did you release me?’ I asked angrily, realizing that I could now speak normally.

Valikath took a moment before answering. He turned to face me: ‘I’m done playing, Vai. Your mind is at the brink of collapse.’

My eyes widened, what did he mean by my mind collapsing? How is that even possible? Why would it collapse, even after all my training and studying?

‘Lies!’ I exclaimed.

‘Vai, we don’t have long before you lose yourself. Listen to me! This is not a request!’ He barked loudly.

‘I’ve had it with your lies, Valikath! Your mouth speaks no truth, it bears no fruit, no revelation. An orna is more trustworthy than you!’ I yelled.

‘You loved him.’ He suddenly said.

I froze, not knowing how to reply.

‘What?’ I mumbled.

He came closer to me and continued: ‘You loved Raim before he became the wielder of the Astral, didn’t you?’

My mouth was open, but my lips didn’t move, as if I had lost the ability to speak.

‘You wanted to confess, but it wouldn’t work out when you realized that he had larger goals than a relationship with you.’ He inquired.

‘Stop...’ I said in disbelief.

‘You still have leftover feelings for him, yet you doubt, you try to suppress them, because you

know he doesn't see you as anything more than just a close friend.' He pushed his narrative.

'STOP!' I yelled.

He backed off, moving back to his original position: 'Your vulnerability is not your inability to comprehend what's right or wrong, Vai. It is your weakness toward Raim.'

'You don't have the right to judge, it is none of your business!' I screamed.

'HYPOCRITE!' He yelled in my face. 'How can you say that, and continuously kill as if there are no consequences to it? Do you want to do just? No, you want to suppress your feelings by doing that which would require you to not think of them.'

I could feel tears streaming down my cheeks as I tried resisting them. My throat was burning up, knowing that if I dared to open my mouth I'd burst out crying.

'Truth be told, Vai, you are nothing but an animal. I have tried convincing you to be a part of something grander, but the deeper I delve into your mind, the more vulnerabilities of a pathetic

animal I discover. I am done giving you second chances, Vai. Your mind cannot handle our tether much longer, before you drop dead, foaming from your mouth.’ He said.

‘What do you want from me?’ I asked in a breathy voice.

‘You want to make Raim happy? Then show him what you are willing to do for him.’ He moved his lips closer to my ear. ‘Bring back the person he misses the most.’

I could feel my breath accelerating. My thoughts were all over the place now. For some reason, I could barely control any of them, seeing as a strong migraine had settled in. The excruciating pain was unbearable, driving me insane.

‘Leave me alone!’ I started screaming on repeat.

I could feel the space around me closing in, I started getting dizzy and claustrophobic, confused as to what was going on.

‘Why?’ I asked finally. ‘Why would I do that?’

Valikath moved toward me: ‘A mind tether can only last for a set amount of time before it

breaks. The only exception is the host: If they are resilient enough, the tether could last nearly indefinitely. However, your mind is crumbling due to the high stress of my presence. Thus, I must halt this tether to save you from an imminent collapse.’ He explained.

I chuckled: ‘So you could corrupt the mind of another.’

‘The process of dying due to the tether is painful and full of anguish, Vai. If you die, my soul is yet again set free, and I’ll be in search of a new host.’ He said.

‘Impossible! Your soul will be harvested by the true sentinels! Dorothum will have your soul yet again!’ I yelled at him.

Valikath started laughing maniacally, finally punching the ground, sending harsh shockwaves throughout the cage.

‘The sentinels hold me chained no more! I am my own prison. That dark, dissonant space of nothingness is a mere memory, a stain on my boot!’ He yelled proudly.

I shook my head: ‘And you think that by bringing back someone from the dead, they’d be useful? Their bodies have been digested by worms, nothing but a cadaver left.’

He forced me to lock eyes with him: ‘Not if we use true resurrection!’

‘What?’ I asked confused.

‘Resurrect them to their previous glory! Bring back who once was, and who will be forevermore!’ He said loudly.

‘No one can truly bring back a soul! The bodies are not competent enough to be brought back! They’d collapse immediately and suffer from pain.’ I yelled. ‘Pardon me, Valikath, but unlike you, I’m not a monster.’

He nodded his head slowly, seemingly agreeing with me.

‘Well.’ He started. ‘There is another way, and judging by your logic, the only way.’ He looked at me with a devious smile. ‘Transfer me to the body of another.’

‘I’d rather die.’ I replied directly without hesitation.

‘Tsk.’ I heard Valikath say as he moved away from me, deep in thought. ‘Then, I don’t have a choice, Vai. It is time.’

‘Time for what tyrant?’ I asked.

Chapter 16: Retaliation

‘Dead?’ Gy’Zin asked concerned.

I nodded in confirmation: ‘I went away to cancel Aerithum’s contract so that we could hunt him down on fair terms. Once I got back to Raim’s chambers, Den, the doctor, and Raim were all dead. Raim’s body wasn’t mutilated it looked like no one had laid a hand on him. The other two, on the other hand, were desecrated.’

We spoke as we hurried to the main entrance. Many assassins encountered us on our way there, greeting us as per usual. Eventually, we got to the main entrance.

‘Sir Eagle!’ Phora stood in front of the doors. ‘I have been gathering our men to go on a manhunt. I knew about Aerithum, but other scouts were also missing from their positions: Caelis and Jun.’

That was strange, I hadn’t given the scouts any missions, they should’ve been on duty.

‘Understood Phora. Come with me with the party, we will move out together and part ways near the docks.’

Phora nodded and followed me, together with three other assassins. As I opened the door, a loud explosive noise went off, and I watched as one of my assassins got blasted back off their feet. It happened so fast that, and the blast had left a ringing sensation in my head, one that I couldn’t get rid of. It was as if a bomb had exploded near my head, dazing me completely. For a moment, I had completely forgotten that one of my men had been hit, lying on the ground, bleeding out. I looked at him, a large hole had formed in his chest. It only took a gasp, and his breathing stopped.

‘What?’ I thought to myself. I couldn’t fully comprehend what had transpired at that moment.

‘Ryo Bin! The infamous guild leader. Finally, we meet face to face.’ A man in green attire said. His head with covered with a hood, brown leather pants, dirty high boots, and riveted gloves. In his hands, he held a strange large weapon, one that I had never seen before. It

looked like a naval cannon that had been shrunk to a smaller size for humans to use. It was covered in several tubes that crossed at multiple points, forming a complex set of machinery. Steam released from its side, setting multiple other push and pull mechanisms in motion.

‘Who are you? And what do you want?’ I said, without moving. At this point, I realized that it wasn’t only him, he had lots of other soldiers with him. They didn’t look like Silver Knights, thus it must’ve been mercs, possibly ones like himself.

‘Who am I? Oh come on, you don’t recognize me...’ He said, slowly taking off his hood.

‘Brother?’

My eyes widened: ‘Tori Bin?’

‘First son of Haki Bin, in the flesh!’ He said amused. ‘Long time no see, brother. How’s the guild been?’

‘What are you doing here?’ I said aggressively.

‘Wow, what a greeting of a long lost brother. Is this how we handle our relationship now, Ryo? Oh, come on! Remember all the things we’d do

together. We were always there for one another, always defending one another. That is until you left me to die.’ His demeanor became less pleasant by the second.

‘Tori, I will only say this once: Leave.’ I said in a calm tone.

He took two steps toward me: ‘I don’t think that talking to your older brother like that is suitable, don’t you think Ryo?’

Gy’Zin immediately took a step forward, standing partially in front of me: ‘Sir say the word and he is mine.’ He whispered.

‘On my signal.’ I whispered back.

‘How about you invite me inside? I have found a new weapon to toy with! Bought it at the Darkwater, which seems like a nice plaything. Let’s talk a bit inside, I’ve missed our time together. This time, you won’t have to leave me bleeding out on the floor.’ He said with what seemed like a proud smile.

‘You killed our father!’ I yelled angrily.

‘He tortured us!’ He yelled back, matching my tone.

‘That gave you no right to murder him. You merely followed your feelings, guided by weakness, spoiled little brat, just when everything is too good, you have to crash it down.’ I exclaimed. ‘You are the pioneer of weak-minded fools, Tori.’

He laughed and took another step forward: ‘Seems like you haven’t changed at all.’

I double-tapped Gy’s shoulder, as I used my other hand to throw a dagger at Tori. He reacted fast enough, dashing out of the way and aiming his weapon at me. Gy quickly pushed me down and dodged out of the way. A swift and loud metal ball was shot out toward us, hitting something in the distance far behind me.

Gy’Zin quickly ran to Tori, ramming him with his shoulder and unbalancing him. Tori then took out a dagger, but Gy punched him in the face, so hard that his head recoiled back from the ground. A spatter of blood flew from Tori’s face, and his hand slowly dropped to the ground.

Gy'Zin punched him a couple more times until his knuckles started to bleed and turned dark.

In the meanwhile, Phora had killed two other men with her swords. I quickly took my bow and shot another one further away. Two mercs remained. They were both in distress, seeing as their entire group got wiped out in seconds. Surely enough, they decided to run away, thus I shot one of them in the back, dropping him to the ground, while Gy caught up with the second one, tackling him and smashing his head into the ground multiple times.

‘Is that everyone?’ Phora called out.

‘I think so.’ Gy yelled.

‘Positive.’ I confirmed, walking up to my brother’s body.

‘You should’ve bled out in that house.’ I said, spitting on his corpse.

‘You alright sir?’ Gy’Zin asked as he approached me.

‘I’m fine, Gy. Thanks.’ I said, nodding at him.

I noticed that Tori had his dagger clenched in his hands. It was held tightly as if his life depended on it. I leaned in for a closer look to inspect it. A button was mounted on the hilt, which was tightly held by Tori's hand. At that moment, his eyes opened, his hands wrapped around my shoulders, and pulled me closer to him.

'Goodnight, brother.' He said, letting go of the button on the hilt. Doing so engaged a mechanism that started ticking. That's when I realized that it was a small bomb. The panic settled in, and all my memories flew past my eyes. His clutches were tight, making it impossible for me to escape. He was dying, and taking me with him to the grave.

Suddenly, Gy'Zin kicked Tori, making his arm loose. Gy then dragged me out and pushed me away with all his might, and just as he did that, an explosion emitted from the dagger, blasting me away.

Once I opened my eyes, they were burning, as if I hadn't slept in days. It took me a bit, but eventually, I noticed Phora looking down at me.

‘Sir, by gold and wealth, you are alive! What a relief.’ She said happily.

I slowly got up with Phora and another assassin helping me sit. Once I got to a sitting position, I took in the surroundings: Bodies spread across the ground, my brother’s body, or what was left of it, completely blown to smithereens, and Gy’Zin lying a couple of meters further, with his right side blown off.

‘Gy... is he...’ I started but couldn’t finish the sentence.

‘Yes, unfortunately.’ Phora informed.

‘Patho.’ I whispered. ‘Patho, patho, PATHO!’

‘He did it to save you, sir. As he always had.’ She tried calming me down.

‘He shouldn’t have died!’ I yelled out.

Moments later, I had composed myself, and gotten back to my feet.

‘Phora, scrap the manhunt. We don’t have time for that. We take Raim’s body and sail to Vilgmeri. I will inform the others to evacuate the building and burn it down. We’re moving bases.’

‘Understood, sir!’ She said, dashing inside the building.

Chapter 17: The Astral Throne

I hastily opened the door, where the arms keep noticed me: ‘Oh hey! I remember you-’

‘I don’t have time for this.’ I said as I pushed the doors of the bar. Once I entered, about a dozen pair of eyes noticed me, and behind the bar, was the main bartender himself.

‘Jo’Ori, make haste, I need you out now!’ I instructed.

He threw his towel down and rushed toward me. Once he came out, he noticed Raim’s body on a large tarp.

‘What is going on? What happened to him?’ He said panicked.

‘I don’t know. My guards were massacred, and when I arrived his body was lifeless. There are no wounds on him, so I’m confused as to what we’re supposed to do.

‘Lifeless? What do you mean lifeless? No... No, no, no this can’t be.’ He was so distressed, he didn’t know what to do.

It was then that I felt that same feeling of cold. I immediately realized who that was.

‘His soul is gone.’ I heard.

Then, his body materialized in front of us from the mist of shadows. He walked a short distance toward us, each step reverberating in the clank of metal.

‘Who took it? And how?’ I asked.

‘Whoever wants to harm him the most, I suppose. As to how beats me.’ He answered.

‘Aren’t you supposed to have these supernatural powers to aid us?’ Jo’Ori asked.

‘Even shadows have limits, barkeep. Much like the life of a mortal.’ He answered coldly. But then a moment of silence set in. Macijek looked around as if he was sensing something.

‘Someone else is here.’ He said, after which Vai appeared behind Jo’Ori. I quickly grabbed him and dragged him out of her swing. The attack left a dent in the ground from its force.

‘Well, looks like the lost soul is right here.’ Macijek commented calmly.

‘Vai?’ Jo’Ori said confused. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Trying to prolong my physical form, Jo.’ She answered.

‘What? What are you talking about?’ Jo’Ori asked.

‘That is not Vai. Some crazy erpatho.’ I said.

I saw Ryo Bin standing in front of me. I couldn’t control what I said, or what I did. My mind was controlled by the tyrant, and I couldn’t do anything about it. The three were watching me viciously, waiting for my next move. That’s when I suddenly blinked toward Jo, smashing my fist into his chest, and sending him tumbling back. Ryo Bin countered by shooting me in the side with an arrow, which I pulled out without hesitation, and charged at him, sending out an astral projection ahead of me, striking him with a false attack, which he didn’t anticipate, and dodged. I then grabbed him by his neck, throwing him into the ground, and stomping on his chest, bursting blood out of his mouth. As he was incapacitated, the only target left was the pale shadow.

‘So, you are Macijek?’ I asked.

He nodded, walking in a circular motion, which I matched, walking around an imaginary sphere: ‘That would be I.’

‘And what threat do you pose to me exactly?’ I asked sarcastically.

He chuckled: ‘I am no threat to you. You just have what belongs to the sentinels. I am here to take it back.’

‘How sweet, should’ve brought some flowers for the occasion.’ I replied.

‘I suppose so, your funeral is neigh anyways.’ He answered, after which I dashed toward him, trying to strike him, but he dissipated into black mist, reappearing behind me, and trying to strike me with a dagger, which I managed to dodge by dashing back and leaving an after-image of me. I tried countering, but he suddenly disappeared, appearing to my right, exactly where he threw his dagger, striking me with his fist, and pushing me back quite a distance.

‘Not bad.’ I said, throwing a spear form in his direction, which he avoided by walking into

shadows, and appearing at a different location. This time, I repositioned and tried siphoning his soul, but the moment the siphon hit his body, it changed shape, becoming engulfed in dark matter, corrupting it. The charge was so tense that I could feel it, thus I had to break it immediately without hesitation, otherwise, I'd suffer its consequences.

‘How is that possible?’ I asked.

He didn't respond, instead, he walked back slightly, summoning shadowy figures which rushed toward me. I quickly summoned hammer form, smashing it into the ground and sending a shockwave ahead, which dissipated all the shadows. Behind them, was Macijek, who was swinging some weapon in my direction, and before it reached me, I summoned my astral sword, which to my surprise, deflected Macijek's blade. He tugged on the chain it was hooked on to retract his weapon. He then started walking in a circular motion again, spinning his chain with a curved blade at the end.

I sent out my blade toward him, he twirled and avoided it, leaning back and attacking me, which

I dodged and repositioned to his side. I then recalled my weapon, making it slash through him, but yet again he dissipated into mist, but quickly reformed in front of me, slashing me with his weapon. It left a large wound on my chest and made me fall to the ground. I threw my sword at him again, but he caught it and threw it back at me, slicing into my hand, and additionally throwing his weapon again, making it wrap around my other arm. Realizing that I couldn't move, he shifted toward me, every step heavily reverberating in the surroundings. With every step, he tugged the chain closer to him, leaving me unable to resist him. Once he had gotten close to me, he touched my chest and slowly started dragging something toward him.

The sudden pain hit, and it was excruciating. With every pull, I could feel the burden leaving my body becoming lighter, until suddenly it was completely gone. The pain had gotten the hold of me, and I passed out.

In the pitch-black, veil of nothingness, a figure emerged. A purple figure that I knew so well. I was floating in black space, where I had only been once.

‘Mela?’ I asked.

‘Vai.’ She replied.

‘Why am I seeing you again?’ I questioned.

‘Valikath is no more, Vai.’ She answered.

‘Are we free?’

‘Yes.’

‘What now?’ I inquired.

‘You are unconscious. Your body needs rest. Raim’s soul has escaped your physical form, returning to their own.’ She explained.

The relieving feeling washed over me, having realized that Valikath was banished back to where he belonged. Was Raim alright? I decimated his leg, he will never forgive me for that. Valikath had revealed secrets that even I had forgotten. My unconfessed love for him. Though, maybe that was for the better. What about Jo? Did he survive? I hope I didn’t hurt him too much. This situation had me thinking about whether or not astral magic was really what I wanted to pursue.

Suddenly, I opened my eyes, and my vision came back. The grey skies were covering the calm streets, almost as if no one lived here at all. There was no sound, nothing. I slowly pushed myself up, as I started to notice more and more of my surroundings. Jo'Ori was sitting in a chair, with his right side bandaged up, probably from the devastating blow I delivered to him. I felt so incredibly sorry for him.

To my right was Raim, leaning against the wall. At that point, I noticed that I could hear again. All the sounds went back to normal, and I was whole again. I stood up slowly, which attracted Raim's and Jo'Ori's attention, making them rush toward me.

'Vai!' Jo yelled out. Both laid their hands on my back, supporting me. 'How are you feeling?'

'I've been better.' I answered.

Both of them took turns embracing me, after which we went over to the nearest patch of grass to sit down.

'Damn this.' Raim exclaimed as he sat down. 'I'm getting too old for this.'

‘Yeah, we’re both in that situation. I could use a drink.’ Jo’Ori commented.

‘Same.’ Both me and Raim replied in unison.

‘So, what now?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. I don’t want there to be a ‘something else’, Vai.’ Jo said. ‘I’ve been worried sick these past weeks, couldn’t help but drown myself in alcohol, hoping to calm my nerves.’

‘I just want one thing. And that’s to attend the next happy hour, Jo. Would you mind, you zuthr?’

Jo chuckled: ‘Sure thing, lizard.’

‘I’m not even Ervenian.’ Raim said.

‘And I’m not an outlander.’ Jo replied, after which both started laughing.

Suddenly, Macijek materialized in front of us, sitting on the ground.

‘Sorry to kill the fun. I am here to finalize the deal.’ He informed.

‘What? After all we’ve been through today, you’re still willing to take a soul? We fought for our lives damn it!’ Jo’Ori exclaimed angrily.

‘If not for me, you’d all be dead. But you formed an agreement with me. I did my part, now I’m waiting on yours.’ He answered.

‘Wait, where is Ryo Bin? And what agreement are you guys talking about?’ I asked confused.

‘Ryo Bin is dead. The stomp on his chest broke his ribcage and pierced a bone through his lung. He died moments later.’ He explained.

‘WHAT?’ I asked loudly.

‘The deal,’ he continued, ‘was to sacrifice a soul in return. Thus, now I’m waiting on my reward.’ He said.

We all frantically looked at one another, until Raim stood up and said: ‘Take me.’

‘Raim shut up! You were gone for a long time as is, I don’t need you to play a hero.’ Jo yelled.

‘Calm down, Jo. Look around you. The destruction we brought with us. Ever since I moved to Vilgmeri, catastrophes have followed,

one after another. I am simply a bringer of death, and those who stand in my wake, feel the wrath of that which I cannot control.' He insisted.

'Over my dead body Raim! I will not-' I was yelling when I felt a sudden pull on my shoulders. When I looked to my left and right, the shadow figures were locking me and Jo'Ori in place, making us unable to move.

When I looked back over at Raim, his body was slightly levitating, as Macijek drained his soul from his body yet again,

'NO!' Both me and Jo yelled.

'When you visit his grave,' Raim mumbled with his last breath, 'tell him that I'm there. Tell him... to find me.' He murmured as his body fell lifeless onto the ground.

'The deal is sealed. I thank you for completing your part of the deal. I will leave you to do your mortal grieving.' Macijek exclaimed as he disappeared.

Epilogue

‘So, did you find it? The Astral Throne?’ He asked.

‘Yes.’ I said, looking blankly at my kjoithita. ‘I did. However, it was not a place. It was there, all along. I sailed to a different kingdom, just to discover that what I sought, was with me all this time.’

‘Did you not feel like you should’ve neglected his existence?’

‘Perhaps I should’ve. I definitely should’ve. Ryo Bin and Raim would still be alive if not for me.’

Jo laughed: ‘Vai, I do have something to tell you.’

‘Hm?’

‘Pumer and Mar’Keth’s graves are being emptied.’ He informed.

‘WHAT?’ I asked. ‘That can’t be legal! I must talk to the auth-’

‘No Vai. That’s how they do it in Grace of Ami. It’s been twenty years Vai. Let them rest in peace.’ Jo said.

‘But now Raim will not have anyone close to him.’ I exclaimed.

Jo looked up at the bright stars above: ‘Maybe, that’s not a bad thing. Maybe, Raim would want that. Chase till he finds Pumer and Mar’Keth in the beyond. Maybe, their souls will meet, and who knows, maybe one day we will meet them.’