



TALES OF ENDRIDGE: THE RISE OF VISERWEN

## **CHAPTER 0: Prologue**

Panting and gasping, he barreled past the bushes and trees of the thick forest, dodging behind a boulder to catch his breath. Looking over to his shoulder to the right, he saw his father, far behind struggling to keep up. The man grasped at his leg, which was oozing blood. Though the night was dark, streams of moonlight made it past the thick canopy to illuminate the path they had yet to take. It was close, they were almost through. They were almost out.

The sound of cicadas and crickets filled the night sky. A night that would have been so pleasant and calm, had it not been for the invasion. Every muscle in the man's body ached as he slowly slid to the ground. For the time being, they were safe, nothing had seen them. He looked back one more time to find his father hiding behind a tree near him. Though he wanted to talk, say something, or even make the slightest move, the man knew their lives depended on complete silence. He needed to make sure they were completely alone. The slight buzzing in his head definitely didn't help. He could hear only the pounding of his heart in his ears now. They

would've been able to beat them, had they not been caught off guard. Or maybe that was the man's arrogance talking.

The smell of fresh grass wafted up his nose as he leaned his head back on the rock, waiting for a while before they began to run again. His hands were shaking from fear as the man clutched a single piece of parchment to his chest. The future of the continent depended on getting the information that was scrawled on the paper to the kingdom of Endridge. He felt fear, not for his life, not for the life of his father, but for the potential failure that lay ahead of him. The man

had lived his life as a soldier and protector to those in his village, and for the first time, he wasn't sure if he would win the fight.

Looking up he saw the trees clearly. They were giant columns rising up to try and touch the sky. Each tree trunk dwarfed any creature standing near it. The roots of the trees were spread out across the woods like giant snakes on the forest floor. Between the trees, vines as thick as wool were stretched across for what seemed to be miles on all ends. The ground was covered in a dark green moss and a humid fog lay at his feet. These woods were not enchanted, but were no less of a spectacle.

The man brought his hand to the ground and slowly moved towards his father on all fours. Immediately he felt the Earth beneath his now moist hands, as if it were alive. His movements were precise and delicate, like a panther stalking in a jungle. Though the searing pain in his leg from where the arrow had struck felt like a dagger with the slightest breeze, the man knew he had to get out of the forest and this is what kept him going. Quickly, he shot a look back, making sure there was no one and nothing behind him, though it was difficult to see clearly considering he was slowly dying. His father looked no better.

His face was crunched up as he clutched his sides. The father's legs were sprawled out and lightly dug into the dirt on the ground. This kind of life was hard for a man of his age, but the father of the valiant knight was no less tough than his son. In the faint distance, the pair heard the hoofs of horses and howling of the riders. They were getting close. It would be difficult, but they would have to move fast and quietly.

The man picked up his father's hand as his father looked up, a smile on his face. Although, the pain behind the expression was obvious, and the man could tell. He gave a slight

nod to his father, as if asking if he was ready to make the final run for it. The father grimaced as he slowly got up on his feet, nodding. He understood. They both inched out from behind the tree, making each step knowing it could easily be their last.

Suddenly, the air around them tensed up for a second as an arrow pierced the location where the father was just sitting. It whizzed by so close you could hear the whipping of the wind around it. The man's eyes widened as time seemed to halt. Fear gripped his heart as he froze knowing that they had been found. After overcoming this daze, which lasted no more than a second, he gripped his father's arm and dived down to the ground. A loud screech interrupted the momentous silence that had embraced the night as the rider called the others to his location. The man's head was focused on the ground as he crunched up his brows. Sweat was dripping down his head into the forest floor as he thought of what to do next. The chance of outrunning the riders was near impossible, so there was only one thing they could do.

"Come on old man," grunted the man. "How bout another joust." He looked just barely behind the tree and noticed the on-coming rider. Patting his father on the back, the man gave him a smile of confidence.

The father smiled back up at him as he unsheathed his sword. "If we are to fall now, then let this be the most valorous death in the lands," he said, picking himself back up. The man took out his own sword. It glistened a shiny metallic color and was slightly worn out on the sides. The sword was long, but so lightweight it felt as if you were holding nothing.

Both the man and his father crouched behind the tree now, counting the seconds before they would have to attack. Each hoofbeat brought the creature closer to its death. Then suddenly, in a matter of seconds, they both jumped out the instant as the rider approached, like a blur of

colors, as they struck down the creature from his horse. He had no chance to utter a word before his demise. The death was silent and perfect, as to not bring attention to their location. But this wouldn't change anything. The other riders already knew where they were. The man and his father stood side by side now. A gelding frantically fraying behind them and the dead rider at their feet. The creature that was atop the steed was about the same height as a human. From head to toe, the beast was covered in twisted dirty hair. It was splattered with blood and now dirt. The man kneeled down next to the creature as he put two fingers on its head and prayed for the life he was forced to take. As he stood up, the hollers of the other riders were carried by the wind. They would be on the two men within moments.

"I need you to get out of here. This battle is not worth your life," pleaded the father to his son, knowing what was to happen.

"And let you take all the glory? No way old man. We shall fight to the death," responded the man, readying his own sword and looking to find the riders. The life of a soldier meant never backing down to a fight. And this forest was about to turn into a battleground fast.

"Akuldra, think for a moment. What's more important is that you get to Endridge," said the father. "I cannot make such a trip myself and I feel as though my time here is done."

Akuldra looked upon his father with confused eyes. He had never heard his father speak of his demise. Now he had just done it twice. He looked upon the old man clearly this time. The battle worn hero had a golden beard that stretched down to his chest. His deep blonde hair was covered in mud as was his face. A giant scar was present across his left eye which told a story of its own. He was deathly thin now, but the man held more power in his bones than anyone Akuldra knew. His raggy shirt cloaked his smaller figure and there were holes and tatters running

the full length of it. Akuldra's father's eyes were a deep red and at this moment, for the first time ever, glistened with the hint of tears. Akuldra's eyes filled with tears as he realized what was about to happen.

"I can't let you fall in battle while I leave, father. That would be the sign of a coward. You haven't raised a coward," cried out Akuldra, with a slight falter in his voice, not wanting to give up just yet. At that moment, a few more arrows whizzed towards the two, but this time they didn't miss. Akuldra looked down at his own tunic, which now had red splotches in three different areas. With two wavering steps, Akuldra's body started to fall to the ground.

"No!" cried out the father, as he pulled the two of them behind another tree. Looking back from the other side, he noticed the riders were much closer now. They were gaining great distance in little time. Without a moment of hesitation, the father hoisted Akuldra onto the stallion that hadn't yet moved and fastened him to the saddle. His lazy body hung over the side of the horse, barely able to hold on. Akuldra was too hazy to argue this as he barely managed to keep his eyes open.

"Nnn..oo," said Akuldra meekly, the word barely leaving his mouth as he knew this was the last time he would ever see his father again.

"You will make it out of here son," said the old man. "The world depends on it." He offered a meager smile, the last one his son would ever see.

With this last statement, the father slapped the horse's hind leg, sending it speeding through the overgrowth of the forest and out of the clearing. More arrows shot towards Akuldra but they all missed. Slowly these arrows became less frequent as the riders focused on Akuldra's father. Mustering all his strength, he looked back one last time, and saw his father taking one

rider at a time, slashing his sword with all his might, but more kept coming. Soon, he was overcome by the sheer number as a sword was buried deep into his stomach. The scoundrels started to hoot and chant around as the dead body fell to the ground. With this final image burned into his mind, Akuldra's body sunk into a deep sleep on the galloping horse as the poison from the arrows took effect on him. The only thing on his mind was his father, and how he let him die.

### **CHAPTER 1: Belveyon**

\_\_\_\_\_ On the first morning of the week, Curmo rose right before the sun. The chirping of birds made their way into his cottage atop the highest hill in his village. Each sweet whistle and tweet brought life into the small lodging. As he stood up from his cot, Curmo's face instantly lit up, remembering what today was. Excitement shot through every bone in his body. Ready to greet the day, Curmo bounced out of bed. He had a nice cottage in Belveyon, and it was a comfortable lodging. Lined against the left side of the room was his wooden bed frame. Atop it was a carpet which was stuffed with straw which he used as a mattress. Although, there were so many holes now that the mattress was nearly out of straw. Curmo still slept on it, though, because it made him feel a little less poor. Directly beside the bed on the right side was a small oak desk with ink and parchments on it. Curmo often wrote announcements for the village's council hall for some extra money. The surface had been blotched so many times that the surface looked like a slate of coal. The four walls surrounding him were lined up with grey stone, which created a curvy, rectangular shape. Carved into these walls on three of the sides were wide holes to let in the outside light. The one next to his bed formed a beautiful ray across his boarded wooden floor. It took awhile for the sun to hit his house, as he neighboured towering mountains

directly to the east. The center of this room held a large table, for when he held feasts. Though they were less and less frequent nowadays. A single candlestick lay on the center of the table. surrounding it were seven chairs, all handmade by Curmo himself. Touching the stone wall on the far side of the cottage was a metal chest which held valuables and gold, of which most belonged to Curmo's parents. On the right of the table was a kitchen which held mortars, vessels, knives, and all the pans. Directly across from the kitchen was a passageway that led into another room. Here was the entrance to the home and a small den. Three couches were lined up next to each other to form a slight semi circle.

Both his parents had gone off to Eslov, a sea port towards the eastern coast of the continent to look for work. They had left Curmo with everything he would need to sustain for a year. That had been eight years ago. Curmo's parents had never returned home from Eslov and most of the villagers assumed they were dead. Those that knew Curmo looked after him when they could, but the boy was strong. He took care of the home and cattle the best he could and started trading in the Belveyon market at a young age. A local merchant named Muralen had taken Curmo in and given him a job.

The sun had now fully risen over the sky to give a nice warmth to the Earth. Curmo walked over to the mirror and cupboard to search for a proper tunic to wear, not as if there were many options for him. He had three pairs of worn out shirts and four tattered trousers. He had a single pair of boots that were in perfect condition which he had recently acquired in the market for a pig. As Curmo changed into his tunic, he looked in the mirror properly for the first time that day.



His hair was a green mess over his head. Everyone said this made him look strange. He hadn't known anyone else to have green hair, but it was something that made him unique. Curmo had gotten it from his mother, who he remembered to have beautiful, flowing locks of green hair. His skin was of a dark golden complexion, which he had acquired from long hard days working under the sun. His face looked really young, when in fact he was nearing his sixteenth birthday very soon. His eyes were a color so rich and green they reminded you of the grass in the pastures. He was always smiling and he liked to stay positive, which was quite hard to do when you'd lived a life like his.

As Curmo stepped out into the sun, he was greeted with a friendly and cool breeze wafting low over the land. Curmo lived on top of a hill facing the mountain range at the coast of the continent. Behind him lay a small patch of woods that wrapped around the mountain like a snug blanket. Belveyon was a small village and was surrounded completely by a large and raging river. Unless one came from Folsele, which was obviously impossible, the only way into the village was across a river. To his left he saw his barn, which held three horses and a few cows. As Curmo looked over the horizon, he took a deep breath, feeling ready to start the day. It was no ordinary day. Just as he was thinking this, a voice interrupted him.

"Good Morning Curmo!" shouted the voice from down the hill. It was that of a girl.

"Hullo Bella!" Responded Curmo down to the girl. The familiar sight of his friend created a pleasant feeling for Curmo. He had known her for the longest time. Bella had been with him since his parents had left for Eslov. They had always loved to work and play together as children. She was about two years older than Curmo himself. Now as they grew older, the two accompanied each other to the market and often helped each other with farmwork.

Bella had long flowing brown hair that was usually left open and always a mess. Her skin was fair and her face radiated a beautiful light that seemed to brighten up Curmo's day whenever he saw it. She had dark brown eyes to match her hair and freckles on both her cheeks. Her eyes always had a sense of mischief and fun, which was something Bella loved. Her gown was also worn out like most of Curmo's clothing. Not many people living in Belveyon were very rich as it was. But to Curmo, she looked heavenly.

"Early morning for you isn't it?" Bella said as she made her way to Curmo's house. "You're usually out till supper," she said jokingly.

Curmo, not caring that Bella was teasing him immediately said, "Have you forgotten what today is? Muralen has agreed to allow me to go to the Endridge market. I'm finally going to get to see the great kingdom."

"I had forgotten," said Bella, almost somberly. Curmo didn't seem to notice as they both walked over to the barn. The smell inside was near unbearable for some people, but these two children were used to it at this point.

"Anyways, I was planning to pack all my things as soon as we got back from the market today, then it will be off to an adventure!" said Curmo gleefully. "Bella, why do you want to stay? Come with me to Endridge."

"Okay sure, let's go" joked Bella giving a slight smirk. She looked at Curmo and cracked up.

"Stop it, come on," said Curmo who also managed a smile. Bella never usually took things seriously and liked to joke around, especially with Curmo. She was usually quiet and reserved, but whenever they got together, she would open up like a book.

“But really, you should come with me. The only thing to make the journey more fun would be a companion,” said Curmo. He knew it was probably to no avail. They had both had this discussion many times over before.

Almost as if she were reading his mind, Bella responded, quite seriously this time, “you know I can’t Curmo. Mother and father are growing older now. I have things to take care of here. My brothers are thinking of leaving home any time. I don’t have a choice.”

They made their way to the outer side of Curmo’s house as they entered the barn. The inside was meek. The left row was lined up with four horses all tied to a mast. Near each one lay a pile of hay. At the end of the row, there stood two mules which Curmo was planning to sell today in the market. The right side was lined up with 5 cows, of which two were newborns. Curmo often sold milk at the market as well. The cows here that had grown up eating the rich grass atop the hill had some of the sweetest milk in all of the continent.

The two got busy to work, shoveling out manure, washing the animals, adding more hay to the piles, and milking the cow. As they worked, Curmo and Bella kept on talking and talking about anything and everything. As the hour passed by, they had finished all the work in the barnyard as they came outside. Curmo filled up a bucket of milk for Bella to take home with her. Her father was a blacksmith and her mother a cobbler so they didn’t do any farm work themselves.

As Bella was preparing to leave to go to her home, Curmo asked her, “Hey, does your father not mind that you spend the morning helping me without pay?”

“You know him,” replied Bella. “He doesn’t expect me to work at all. Adam and Peter already have jobs and all I do is sit at home helping mother with shoes anyway. Plus, I do get Bessie’s milk!”

“Well that’s true. I’m going to head over to the market now. Try to come down whenever you can. I want to go early to talk to Muralen about the venture and sell this mule.”

“Alright Curmo. I’ll see you then,” shouted Bella without looking back. She made her way down the north side of the hill as Curmo went down across the back making his way over to the market with his mule trailing close behind. He knew a short route around a patch of woods to get there faster. As he entered the woods, the song of birds slowly died off in the background. And instead of the bright and calm morning he had woke up to, Curmo felt a darker and cooler feeling in this patch. He was always uneasy walking through the woods. Not many people usually went through it and it was mostly uncharted. The only reason Curmo crossed it was because it was directly behind his house and he loved the feeling of being in the unknown. There was a sense of excitement that came with traveling through here. Something he felt every time he walked into the woods. As he crossed over to the other side though, he couldn’t shake this feeling that he was being watched. But, when he looked back, there was nothing and no one there. It was probably the excitement over his travel to Endridge that gave him this uneasy feeling today.

On the other side of the patch of woods, he was once more greeted with the brightness of the day and the busy hustling of the market. The Belveyon market was one of the largest in the lands, only second to that of Eslov and Endridge. There was always the sound of bargaining and men yelling the prices of their products. The market was in the shape of a giant square. There

would be stalls set up wherever there was room to squeeze in. Looking to his left, Curmo saw vendors selling bread and fruits. Next to him was a man trying to sell a cow which had probably seen one too many winters. All across there were stalls giving meat, ale, wool clothing, woodpiles, wheat, and anything you could think of. There was a slight incline in the cobble road that led to the back end of the market. Here there were stores and permanent buildings rather than stalls. The owners here included Bella's father, Otis, and Muralen, who sold livestock, saddles, and anything else related to animals. There was also a bookkeeper, the doctor, and the local butcher.

Curmo walked down the path squeezing in between stalls and people. Belveyon was mostly a small town and everyone knew each other. So, Curmo would get a lot of waves and 'hullo!'s as he made his way up to Muralen's shop. He would wave back with a pleasant smile to each of these men and women. As he approached the shop, a voice called from somewhere around the side of the building.

"Ah! Curmo. I'm glad you're here. Come give me a hand here boy. I've been trying to get this mare into the back barn but she just won't listen," said the voice. It was Muralen. Curmo rounded to the side of the building, right after tying the mule to the front of the shop.

As he came up to Muralen, he noticed the wailing creature. The horse was completely frantic as it was shaking its head and kicking back with its hind legs. It was a beautiful white mare with a slightly golden mane that ran down the length of its neck.

"Oh. I got this sir. Let go of her," said Curmo. Muralen, without a second of hesitation, loosened his grip on the horse and stepped back.

Curmo made his way up to the horse, holding his hand out defensively, but knowing that it wouldn't really be needed. Without a falter in his step, he walked right up to the fraying mare who was still kicking around, and put his hand on the horse's neck, closing his eyes. The horse immediately calmed down, looking down at Curmo. It neighed out while giving him a curious look. Slowly, it tilted its head down, almost as if bowing down in front of Curmo.

"That's a good girl," said Curmo stroking his hand over the horse's head, a little more confidently now.

"And the boy does it again. I don't know how you do it but you have a way with these beasts Curmo," said Muralen, taking the horse back to the barn.

Curmo followed him back to the barn. The gap between Muralen's store and the tailors right next door wasn't nearly big enough for Muralen. He had to turn sideways just to squeeze through. You see, Muralen was a large man. He would completely dwarf anyone who would stand near him. On his face lay a large moustache stretching from the two ends of his face. Muralen's face looked small compared to the rest of his body. He'd spend drunken nights in the tavern and hold large feasts at his own cottage. In all of Belveyon, Muralen was probably the richest merchant for he was also the most frequent visitor of the Endridge market. Whenever Muralen made his travels, he brought a large caravan of horses, cows, donkeys, and pigs with him. This year though, as you already know, he was choosing to send his young apprentice instead.

As they cleared the market and the backside of Muralen's store, they were greeted with a wide open field. Blades of grass of all sizes stretched all the way to the base of the mountain. A large stretch of land that resembles a giant blanket of green lay before them. As far as your eyes

could see in both directions, there was flat land. Not even the smallest hill dared interrupt this beautiful continuity. And far down this sea, the land slowly curved up to the mountains of the east coast. It was weird to think that such a closed off piece of land could feel so open and free. It was a sea of grass, and standing right in the center of it, right in front of the two of them, was Muralen's barn. It was a giant goliath of a building. In fact, you could see the top of it right from the market itself. The barn stretched well past Muralen's own shop on both sides. The front doors were about twice the size of Curmo's height. While it was wooden, the supporting beams were all lined with steel, making the structure almost feel like a fort. Inside, about seventy animals had a place to call home. Outside the barn itself, some cows grazed on the green pastures and a few horses galloped close to the base of the mountain. They were all Muralen's, but it was of no worry to let them roam. Ever since Curmo had started working for Muralen, not a single animal had run or gone missing. It was as if he could talk to them and they would listen to him. Just like Muralen had said earlier, Curmo had a way with these beasts in a way you've probably never seen before.

As the two made their way over to the large barn, Curmo, stepping in closer to Muralen, asked, "So, sir, how's our 'friend' doing?." He kept his voice down as if to make sure no one would hear him.

"Feels like that damn beast grew two fold in a day. Her wings are much bigger now. I feel like I'm spending a fortune just to feed that little brute," responded Muralen, obviously annoyed at the animal.

As Muralen opened the gate to the barn, handing the reins of the horse to Curmo, a giant creature lunged out and jumped onto Curmo. He could see its ferocious eyes. The creature's

vicious claws were just inches away from Curmo's face. It growled a low and deep sound as if it were about to attack.

Muralen rolled his eyes and walked into the barn as Curmo uttered a laugh. "I missed you too pal," he said to the creature as he jumped up and stroked the creature's neck. Finally Curmo stepped back to get a look at it.

The large dragon's serpentine scales were a glistening black color. They stretched from her head down to her talons. The dragon's head had backwards horns that curved slightly upward. Her eyes were a glowing purple, which matched the scales lining up the inside of her monstrous belly. The scales continued across the beast's arms and legs as well, all four of which held giant claws at the end of them. Her armor slowly ended at her wings, which stretched across

about twelve feet. One of the wings was obviously mangled as it was bent forward in an unnatural direction when compared to the other wing. The hurt wing was covered in bandaging from Curmo trying to heal it. The creature looked as big as a horse now and was a lot stronger as well. Curmo hadn't seen his friend for about a week now, back when it was the size of a small dog.

As Curmo ran back into the barn, the dragon followed him. To any other man, the sight of the beast would have struck fear into their hearts, but Curmo loved his dragon since he had rescued her a year ago.

"I'm nearly done with taking care of this creature Curmo. I swear it's going to eat my animals one of these days," said Muralen as he put the white mare in the post furthest down the rows. Just like Curmo's own small barn, Muralen's had the animals lined up on both ends running down the length of the barn, except there was a giant pen all the way in the back that



was lined with a fence higher than the tallest horse, but the dragon had still found a way to cross over it.

“This creature is called Zevnor, sir,” responded Curmo, defending his dragon. “Besides, you know she would never eat one of her friends right?” Looking over to the right, Curmo pointed to the dragon who was now peacefully lying atop a golden stallion, the horse barely being able to hold up the weight of the creature. Curmo laughed at the sight.

“Hmm well you’d better make sure of that or the first thing I’ll do is throw her out to the townsfolk,” said Muralen, sounding quite annoyed still, but Curmo knew these were not real threats. The dragon was not a threat to the animals at this point, and it had on few occasions scared off a few wolves trying to sneak into the barn. Zevnor was a valiant guardian for the barn. As Muralen started to feed the other animals, Curmo called over Zevnor and lugged over a giant piece of meat. The dragon ripped into the food and devoured the whole meat like a snack. Curmo could now see what Muralen meant when he said Zevnor was costing him a fortune, but he also knew they could afford it.

As the two turned around to leave, Zevnor jumped onto Muralen and pinned him to the ground. Instead of his regular annoyance, though, Muralen burst out laughing and said, “Alright you overgrown reptile, get off me or you’re not getting fed today.” Muralen tried to show annoyance towards Zevnor but didn’t want to admit to Curmo that she was growing on him, though it was quite apparent. They put Zevnor back into her pen, although as they knew, this probably wouldn’t keep her for very long. Curmo gave a smile before they closed the gates behind them making sure that no one saw them. He didn’t trust the other townsfolk to think about the dragon the same way that Muralen had. Dragons were very vicious creatures. The

townsfolk would hold regular sermons and rituals to ward off the creatures, but they didn't understand animals like Curmo did. If anyone ever found out about Zevnor, they would attempt to slay the poor thing.

"So today is the day, when do I begin sir?" Curmo asked Muralen, asking about his well anticipated trip. Curmo could barely hold in the excitement any longer. The boy had seen nothing of the outside world, but only heard tales. And of Endridge, he had heard the most amazing things. It was labeled the Kingdom of the Heavens. It was a place of wondrous size and towered above any castle. Although Curmo loved Belveyon as it was his home, he always wished to leave at some point. It was as if the world out there was calling to him. He wanted to meet the outside people, see all the fabled creatures, visit every kingdom there was.

"Hmm? Begin what boy? Oh actually can you stand at the shop for me for some time. I need to go buy a loaf of bread," said Muralen, a slight hint of mischief in his eyes. Curmo looked at him in disbelief.

"But I'm leaving today. You said it yourself that I could go to Endridge this year in your place. Don't go back on your word now sir," exclaimed Curmo feeling slightly let down.

Muralen let out another hearty laugh. "I was just messing with you boy. We must wait for your escort. The road over to Endridge is perilous. As you know there are creatures at every turn. Though I'm sure they won't attack, I can't let you go without protection, so I've hired the best knight I could find to take you over to Endridge."

"Muralen, you know I can make the trip on my own. I don't need a knight protecting me," gushed Curmo, feeling slightly annoyed at Muralen's comment. "Now boy, you're my responsibility. I can't let anything happen to you," said Muralen as he put a hand over Curmo's

shoulder. Curmo nodded reluctantly as they reached the inside of the shop. The whole of the shop smelled of fresh wood which lined the inside of the whole shop. The back of the shop was lined up with pixie catchers, fishing poles, and monoculars. The right end of the shop had bales of hay and other food for livestock. Small rugs and carpets were handed from the ceiling at random points across the store, all with different patterns across them. The bench where Muralen stood had potions and medicine scattered all over the place. On top of a shelf to his right was a wooden chest where he put his day's earnings. Behind him Muralen held his prized collection of swords which he had collected from his trips to Endridge. In fact, Muralen held a lot of little trinkets and large weapons which he had collected from his many travels. He possessed rugs from the finest weavers of Volant all the way to potions he had collected in the Eslov taverns. Muralen squeezed behind his counter as customers started pouring into the store. As Curmo was helping them, he constantly looked over out the window trying to see if he could spot the knight that was to travel with him.

“When is the escort to arrive? If he doesn't come soon, I'll have to depart at night, and that would be more dangerous” said Curmo over to Muralen, who also looked puzzled at the late arrival of the knight. “I'm not sure boy. Give it a moment longer,” responded Muralen not knowing what else to say.

Curmo reluctantly went back to work, though he was not more impatient than ever. As he was selling a bag of pig pellets to an older woman, he heard a loud commotion coming from outside the shop. There was a crowd gathering towards the entrance of the market. Someone had just arrived into the town. “Sir,” said Curmo. “I think someone's arrived. Could I step out for a moment to see it?”

Muralen gave him a nod as he was also peering over his counter to see what it was, consequently spilling over a few of his potions and a glass of ale. As Curmo hurried out the store, the murmur of the people became louder. Curmo slowly nudged his way in between the large crowd trying to get in front, constantly being respectful as he apologized for every person he bumped into. At the front of the group he was what the others were seeing. There was a group of about twelve Cobali who were in horrible condition. Two of them were being carried and in the rear, they carried the body of man. He was half dead and lying on a sheet that they brought into town. The Cobali were a smaller species. They were about half the size of humans. Their arms were like sticks compared to their bodies and each one had four bony fingers. Their legs were very thin and only three long and pointy toes came out of their legs. The body of a Cobalus was misshapen, like an unformed piece of clay. Their heads were more or less large ovals that stuck out of the top of their bodies. Two large and pointy ears stuck out on each side as did a point little nose from the front. When they opened their mouths, you could see rows of pointy yellow teeth and you could smell their disgusting breath whenever they spoke. Though the Cobali were a perfectly peaceful people, they lusted for one thing more than anything else in the world-- money. You would often find them in the corner of taverns with shady men in hoods collecting bounties.

“What business have you, Cobali?” asked a man from the crowd. Though he sounded fairly confident, there was a falter in his voice. These creatures were known to be aggressive and usually didn’t find themselves in human settlements. Whatever they had seen out there must have been fairly important.

“We find man on road out woods,” said the one at the head of the group. He was the largest of them and spoke with a demanding voice, almost as if commanding everyone in the marketplace to listen to him. It was a gruff voice, one that matched his physical appearance. This Cobalus had grotesque warts randomly arranged across his face. His eyes were so dark and obscure you could see a clear reflection of yourself in them. Over high eyes, the Cobalus’s brows were scrunched up.

Cormu then looked over at the man that the Cobali had brought in. His whole body was covered up in a suit of armour. Over his face was a metallic helmet that had been dented in several different places. Across his head though, there was a giant caving in of the metal. His head had been bashed in. In fact, all over, the suit was bashed and dented up. There were signs of blood on the outside of the suit. Lying next to the man was his sword, which was soaked in blood down to the handle. He had put up a good fight before he had fallen.

“Oh my god,” said a woman next to him as she placed a hand over her mouth. Behind Curmo, a man took off his hat and held it over his chest. “May this blessed knight’s soul find peace,” he said.

You could feel the distraught of all the villages as they stared at the lying corpse.

“My is Xanbald, ” said the probable leader of the Cobali. “We take reward from you. Five gold pieces for bring man,” Xanbald said. Right after he said this, murmurs began to erupt across the group.

“You couldn’t save his life! Why should we pay you,” shouted a man from across the circle. Another woman screamed from near Curmo, “We’re not paying for a corpse you idiot!”

Soon the whole market had erupted into a screaming fight between the Cobali and the villagers. It was obvious to imagine that this was going to end in a brawl. As Xanbald and his people began to advance on the villagers, a hand lay on Curmo's shoulder as a voice shouted over the rest of the crowd. "ENOUGH!" yelled Muralen over the sound of the shouting villagers. Curmo looked up at him, as did everyone else in the marketplace. As his eyes shifted over to the man lying on the ground near him, his face went pale. Muralen knew this man.

Muralen reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small sack that clinked as he pulled it out. "Ten pieces and you tell us exactly what you saw," Muralen said as he tossed the money over to Xanbald.

Taking the money in his hand, Xanbald's face broke out into a chilling toothy grin. The other Cobali started shoving and pushing their way past each other to see the sack of gold for themselves. They started closing in around Xanbald picking up each piece and biting down on it, to make sure that it was real gold.

"Don't insult me now," said Muralen crossing his arms. "What exactly did you see out there? That there was a good knight, maybe the best I ever knew. Who was it that killed him?"

Xanbald carefully put each coin back into the sack before tossing it over to one of his friends in the back. This got the other Cobali fighting again trying to get a look at the coin. Xanbald's smile left his face as he looked up at Muralen. "When I step out clearing in mountain, see man fight riders. Hairy thing on horse. Arrows and knives and swords. Man horse run away and man fight. He die. I see creature. It was a dentron. They out of woods." Xanbald's face went back into that chilling smile Curmo had seen earlier. He just barely then glanced towards Curmo, as Xanbald's smile lowered into concern. He could sense something.

A slight laughter erupted from the people around Curmo. He looked up and around, equally as confused at what he'd heard.

"That can't be, Xanbald," said Muralen over at the Cobali. "The dentron are rumored creatures. No one has ever seen one. Even if they had, it has only been known to live in the Folsele forest. Why would they ever follow a man into the mountains?" said Muralen, obviously not believing what Xanbald had said either.

The smile was immediately wiped off of his face as Xanbald took a threatening step towards Curmo and Muralen. The townsfolk near him backed off and immediately grew silent. If it weren't for Muralen's heavy hand on Curmo's shoulder, he would have backed off too, but Muralen stood his ground, even leaned in a little to show the creature he wasn't scared.

"You think I lie, human?" said Xanbald, pointing a finger at Muralen. His face was scrunched up in anger and his other hand was balled up in a fist. Muralen said nothing, not wanting to anger this creature anymore than he already had. "This mean your death. We leave now, we safe. You stay and face dentron if you like," said Xanbald giving a slight shrug before turning around to face the rest of his party. "We go now!" he screamed at the top of his lungs as the other Cobali shouted and began to walk off away from the town.

Even with the creatures gone, an ominous and dangerous feeling lingered in the air. What Xanbald had said definitely left the townsfolk disturbed. Curmo himself was shaking. As a few moments turned into a minute, Muralen said very loudly, "Alright then. They're gone. Go off now and leave the man alone. He's suffered enough for today."

The crowd slowly began to disperse as they all went back to their stalls and back to buying in the market. The men stationed towards the front of the market, where the man now lay,

all moved themselves away, as far away as they could get. Creatures in Belveyon were not common. This had clearly affected the whole of the village. The cheery bustling of the market now instead had gaps of silence and low murmurs that could be heard all around. Muralen stepped over to the man and patted Curmo on the back, as if beckoning him closer.

He picked up a blanket which a kind merchant had given to Muralen. "Alright boy. Now I want you to pick his legs and I will get his arms. We need to hoist him onto the blanket," Muralen said over to Curmo. Curmo looked up at the man, confused. "Oh come on boy, we can't just leave him here to rot. He needs a proper burial."

Curmo still stood there for a moment before inching towards the man and grabbing his feet. The metal felt cold and heavy against his arm. Curmo was very uncomfortable, but he still dragged the heavy body over to the blanket before Muralen started pulling it over to a small plot near a tree on the outskirts of the market. Muralen started digging the dirt as Curmo stared at the ground, shaking from what was in front of him.

"Do you know, boy," said Muralen, looking over at Curmo in slight distraught himself. "This man was supposed to be your escort to Endridge."

Curmo looked up at Muralen, the full weight of his words not quite sinking in. Then it hit him. His escort was dead. There was no way he could make it to Endridge without the help of a knight. Even if he could, Muralen wouldn't let him.

"I'm sorry boy. I won't be calling in any other knights either. I can't have them risk their lives by coming through Belveyon anymore," said Muralen. "I don't believe what the Cobalus said, but there is a danger out there. You should go home too, and try to stay there. I don't want you coming to the market for the next few days."



Curmo looked at the ground. Belveyon, his own home, was in danger. He looked around towards the other homes down across the entrance to the market. Not wanting to go down the long and empty path, Curmo made his way back across the market to the entrance of the woods. The sound of digging could be heard behind him, and in front of him he saw curious children peeking over the tree at the front of the market, where the man was behind buried. Some mothers took their children away, shushing them and telling them to go home. Looking around, Curmo had never before felt so alone.

As he entered the lip of the woods, the sound of the nervous villagers died behind him. Instead he was greeted by that strange feeling he had had earlier. Looking around, Curmo felt as though he were being watched. He quickly hastened his pace, walking over the same overgrowth across the base of the floor. The woods seemed darker now than they had before. The trees stretched up and across his head, as if trying to block out the sun from ever reaching him. Curmo suddenly felt scared, as though he should have just taken the open road to his home. Peeking back for the first time, he noticed a quick shadow dodging behind a tree. Curmo's eyes widened as his pulse quickened. His whole body shook for a second before suddenly, a hand reached out and grabbed him from behind.

The sudden shock of the touch sent a bolt of fear through Curmo's body. He turned around and let out a shriek louder than any he had ever uttered before and fell down to the forest floor. Standing above him was a hideous, fearsome... young girl?

"Bella?" Curmo asked squinting upwards towards the dark silhouette. It was indeed Bella who shook from laughter as she herself fell down to the forest floor. "Oh Curmo, you should have seen your face," she managed to say between giggles. Curmo stood up as his face grew red

hot from anger and embarrassment at the same time. He couldn't believe she would jest at a time like this. Angrily, without saying a word, Curmo turned around and continued his walk towards his home.

"Hey wait!" Bella shouted behind him trying to keep up. "I'm sorry Curmo, I didn't mean to scare you but you jumped like a rabbit." She still couldn't hold in all her laughter. Curmo still burned with anger as he stopped dead in his tracks and turned to face her.

"A man is dead Bella. Some Cobali brought my escort to the market with his head bashed in. Xanbull or whatever his name was said there were monsters roaming the area. This is not the time for fun," said Curmo hurriedly as he saw the color drain from Bella's face.

"Someone is dead?" she exclaimed in disbelief. "A knight too," responded Curmo, less angry now that Bella understood what he was feeling.

"I..I think I need to go home Curmo," she said, sounding just as scared as Curmo felt. Curmo nodded and they started walking towards the end of the woods, about to make it to the clearing. As they were walking, though, Curmo heard a low growl coming from behind him.

"I told you Bella, no more messing around. This is serious," said Curmo with just the slightest flare.

"That wasn't me," Bella responded looking towards Curmo with wide eyes.

The two slowly turned around as they saw they were standing face to face with a large hairy beast. It was standing on two hind legs and had hair covering every inch of its body. The creature's eyes were a deep red color that had only anger in them. Its whole body was covered in scars and it was bleeding profusely. On the face, the two could see baring fangs, of the kind only found on wild hounds. A large tail was visible stretching behind the creature which was grey

with a white tip at the end. On its two arms, claws the size of fingers that were caked with dry blood. A stench emanated from his body that reeked like a wild animal that had never been cleaned. The fury in its expression was visible as it took a menacing step towards the two.

Curmo felt a kind of fear he had never before. He was about to die. The creature looked like the one that Xanbald had described and if it had killed a knight, there was no way he would survive this. With this thought in mind, he looked over at Bella, who now seemed to regret ever thinking to follow Curmo in the woods.

Curmo immediately put his arms in front of Bella and pushed her behind him. He now stood in front of the creature with nothing and no defense. Whispering low beneath his breath, he said, "On my count, run as fast as you can and don't look back. One, two, NOW!" The two shot back towards the clearing towards Curmo's cottage. The beast howled before running towards them, pushing off of trees and bushes with immense power and speed closing the distance between it and the children fast. As the two made the clearing, the beast was nearly on them. Its hideous stench was drawing closer with each passing moment. Suddenly, Curmo felt its heavy hands push him to the ground hard as it rolled him over.

"CURMO!" shouted Bella behind him, having seen what happened and stopped herself. Curmo was not face to face with the beast, its ugly hairy face inches from Curmo's. The creature's saliva dripped onto his forehead as Curmo flinched slightly from its horrendous breath. Right as it opened its mouth, a sword was thrust into the creature's body. With a sudden look of surprise, it collapsed on top of Curmo, who pushed it off and backed away as fast as he could. It now lay there limp on the grass with a sword buried in its gut.

He looked up, wondering if it were Bella who had slayed the beast, but saw a man instead. After pulling his blade from the beast, the man stepped up to Curmo offering him a hand and pulling him up.

Bella rushed over to Curmo now and hugged him, relieved that he was okay. The two looked over at the mysterious man as Curmo asked him, “Who are you?”

The man cleaned the creature’s blood off his blade.

Looking from Bella to Curmo, the man then said, in a rough voice, “I am Akuldra of Folsele, and I need your help.”

## **CHAPTER 2: Floating Fortress**

\_\_\_\_\_Light from the full moon flooded the dark halls of the castle. Not a single candle was lit in these halls. The whole structure slowly rocked back and forth as each proceeding wave hit its sides. The floating fortress was a creation of pure magic. From across the sea, seeing the giant castle atop water would have made one rub their eyes wondering if they were in a dream. But it was real, and belonged to Chancellor Gylbard of Viserwen. He was a mysterious man who ruled the kingdom of Viserwen, the largest of the kingdoms from the north. From the outside, the whole structure was built with lined up stone reinforced with steel. Four giant towers jutted out from each of the four corners of the castle. Atop each of these towers, multiple archers stood guard. In the center, a bigger and wider tower stood. It loomed over the rest of the world as if to say it were superior. Each tower was lined on the outside with barbed wires and the bases were constantly surrounded by guards. The entrance had three gates each so heavy it took five men to raise. Once inside the actual structure, the first thing you were instructed to was a giant ballroom

with an octagonal table lying directly at the center of it. There were a few doors on all sides of this room. In front of one of them, another two guards stood who were significantly larger than the others in the castle and possessing much larger weapons. A giant X was scrawled on the front of that door. What lay inside was of unimaginable power and strength. Another door led to an elegant dining hall, where the chairs were rumored to have been carved from pure diamond. Above the table was a chandelier about the size of three men. Across the third door in this room was a smaller room, a parlor, where the men aboard the ship laughed and talked. There was finally a fourth door. It was a living quarter and kitchen for the workers aboard the fortress. This room was cramped, small, and smelled awful. Besides this room, everything about the castle, down to the last detail was in perfect order, shape, and position. There was not an apple in a basket that wasn't perfectly symmetrical. Towards the end of this room, two giant staircases led to each of the eight councilman's rooms-- the most distinguished in the house. In the center of each one lay a large bed with mattresses stuffed with the feathers of geese. Each room had a table with a giant stack of paper and multiple containers of ink. Each room also had its own smaller parlour with a small table and chairs surrounding it and under each of these tables was the skin of an animal. In some, a bear, while in others a tiger. Overall, the elegance and protection of this structure was like nothing ever previously imagined. Now, down at the councilman's table, seven men and women sat looking at each other. One of them was from the kingdom of Viserwen, two from Meertrov, two from Maluva, and one from both Peridon and Treeslov.

“Where is the chancellor? I grow impatient by the minute. Were we not called down an hour prior?” said one of the men, the king of Treeslov. He was a bald man with a long flowy robe. Everything about his expression radiated anger and frustration. This was the first

night of the fortress since they had departed that morning. None of the other members of this council had any idea of the attack Viserwen was planning. In fact, none of them knew much about the chancellor of Viserwen. He was an isolated man of an even more isolated kingdom. The borders of Viserwen had closed after the great Continental war. In the only appearances the chancellor made, he had a mask covering his face.

“I concur with the king,” exclaimed a woman who was sitting directly across from him. Her posture was perfect as she sat straight back in her chair. Her gown flowed down to the floor and was made of pure silk. She was queen of Meertrov, and sitting next to her was her husband.

“It is of the greatest insult to arrive an hour after your guests,” he exclaimed, sharing the same enthusiasm and hatred as his wife. The tension in the room was obviously rising.

“Well we must be patient, your highnesses,” said another man close to the table. He was dressed a lot poorer than the rest of the lords and ladies and had on only an overgrown tunic and large trousers. A hood was covering his face so that only his eyes could be seen, which glistened a deep blue.

“Oh shut up you!” cried out an older looking woman who was sitting next to the king of Treeslov. Her face was lined with wrinkles and her brow was now scrunched together as her face showed disgust for the man who had just spoken out of place. She was the queen of Peridon.

“So does this peasant know of manners? I did not know they taught that to farm animals,” the queen of another northern nation, Maluva, exclaimed. This got a lot of chuckles out of the rest of the group as the king of Maluva even pushed the boy to the side. All except one woman

who was sitting towards the front of the table, closer to the front, laughed. She stared down at her hand, jet black hair covering her face, with one foot resting on the table. Her body was laced in armour. Women in the Northern continent were not known for battle, but she had seen many a war, and this was about to be the biggest one yet. The man-servant gave a slight bow and left the table.

As the group was murmuring, talking about the disrespect of the chancellor, a loud bang came from above the staircase as a large door was heard closing. The murmurs started to grow silent. A man walked down the staircase. His size was immeasurable. His whole body was the size of a large bull. Each step he took commanded power. The man's face had a scruffy beard that extended from the top of his cheeks down to his neck. On top of his head lay neatly combed blonde hair. As he walked, even the calm rocking of the ocean seemed to pause. The whole world stared in awe at the power of this being. As he neared the table, the men and women surrounding it stood up and bowed looking at the man.

“My lord, we were awaiting your arrival. It seems as though your general has not arrived yet,” exclaimed the King of Treeslov, speaking quite clumsily, obviously intimidated by the size of this man, who towered over him. The large man’s face showed a slight sense of amusement, as if having expected this.

“Aye, but I am not Gylbard. I am the general,” he said, standing to the right of the seat at the front of the table, leaving the open seat between him and the armored woman. The king of Treeslov’s eyes widened as he gulped. Both the general and the warrior looked at each other, giving a slight nod as the man turned his attention back to the others at the table. “Although, it seems you have already met him.”

They suddenly heard a voice from behind them, “Yes I do believe I have been well acquainted with our guests here today.”

As they all turned back, a man stepped out of the darkness. He wore a poor man’s tunic and grey worn trousers. It was the same man the group had ridiculed earlier. Now the Viserwen warrior let out a light laugh, putting her head back. Locks of her black hair moved out from across her face, to reveal a beautiful face, which held a dazzling and mysterious charm. Her perfect skin was of a darker complexion. Her mannerism was very immature and unprofessional. Although she didn’t much care. Seeing the unsettling feeling drop into the voices and character of the royalty was plenty fun for her.

Gylbard stepped forward towards the head of the table. He was a smaller man than the general, but still quite tall. He put a mask over his face before removing the hood from over his head, so that the only feature on his face you could see were those deep blue eyes. His hair was as white as snow as it fell in messy locks over his face. There was nothing about him that made him feel as threatening and feared as they all saw with the general, but there was something unsettling about him. An aura of unpredictability lay in the air surrounding his presence.

The council, and basically anyone, knew very little about the chancellor. No one had ever seen his face and lived, except the two next to him.

“I apologize my lord, I didn't know -,” said the queen of Meluva, who now seemed frightened of the prospect of offending the chancellor in his own home - despite having felt quite comfortable enough to have called him a peasant moments earlier.

“Do not be,” responded Gylbard, interrupting the queen. “The people I meet these days reek of fear and lies and feigned loyalty. Only outside of my presence can I ever expect to see



anyone's true face. My failure to come forward until now lies in my wish to observe you. I have learned a lot about each of you lords and ladies since we have boarded this grand vessel," responded the chancellor looking around the table.

"Please sit down, we need to continue discussing the invasion," said Gylbard as he gestured for everyone to sit down. Everyone awkwardly looked towards each other before they sat, feeling oddly intimidated yet intrigued by the chancellor at the same time.

"Before we begin, however, I would like to introduce you all to General Mortek and Lady Virago of the Viserwen kingdom," said the chancellor, directing the royals to his right and left direction. Virago continued smiling as she gave a slight bow when her name was called. Mortek remained static.

Each of the members gave acknowledgement to the Viserwens before the general laid out the plans for the attack on the table. It was a map of where they were to invade the western continent and their forces.

"If you were not aware, our attack begins at Folsele, the northern tip of the continent. Once on land, we will lay camp and wait for the armies to arrive. There is a forest south of the village. Those woods are known to be crawling with monsters. No Folelean will be able to leave and we will have entered the continent without detection," explained the general while pointing out the different areas of the map.

"If the tides obey, we should be able to make land before sunrise," added the chancellor. "There is one thing we must be wary of though. There is a man living in Folsele. Nay, a deviant. With the help of a mage, this knight of Folsele was granted the power of an Egant, a giant monster residing in the forests of the western continent. If there is anyone that can make it out of

those woods, it would be him. When we enter Folsele, I will send out a group to kill the man. If he escapes, all our plans could be ruined and we could lose everything.”

“Sir, but is there anyone here who could dare fight a deviant,” exclaimed the Meertrovian queen, sounding unsure of the plan. Deviants were powerful creatures, known to fell large beasts and humans alike. Fighting one would not be easy. Especially if they were to fight on his land.

“I’m glad you ask m’lady. It won’t be any of our people fighting, but the monsters of the woods.” The woman looked at him, still puzzled. The beasts are not known to negotiate and trying to control them would be a futile act. What was the chancellor thinking?

“If you remember, I ensured you we would be assisted with magic when we fought this war,” said Gylbard, looking over to the guards and giving them a nod.

Virago looked distraught for the first time that night. “Is that a wise choice my liege? He is dangerous and we are still above water,” she questioned. He looked back at her, and in an attempt of reassurance, said, “We have nothing more to worry about. He has been bound up well.”

As the guards opened the gate, a few of the council members gripped the table, leaning back, waiting for what was about to walk through that door. Inside was a windowless room that didn’t let in any light besides the one that was flooding in from outside. Everyone squinted and leaned closer while at the same time fearing what was about to come out. Virago put her hand over her sword and even Mortek took a defensive stance. The tension in the room was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Slowly, one of the guards went into the sea of darkness to bring out the unknown man that everyone had learned to fear so much. In an instant, he was shot out of the room. A bright white light could be seen inside as the guard came flying out the door and

crashed into the table. He immediately fell unconscious to the floor. From the blow, even the table had taken damage as a large crack crept its way towards the center. The council screamed and immediately stood up and backed away.

“What is this Gylbard!” shouted the king of Treeslov. “Have you brought a mage on board the ship! This is ludicracy. You could have killed us all!”

Gylbard shot him a look so fierce it made him shut up immediately. His eyes now flashed with anger which overtook the calm demeanor he had shown the rest before. “I assure you my good sir. Everything is under control.” With this, he nodded towards the other guard who pulled out a stick from his back pocket and held it out for Gylbard.

Gylbard now stood up and walked over to the door himself, stepping over the now unconscious guard, never faltering a step. He grabbed the stick from the man’s hand and himself dipped into the darkness of the room. A white streak of light was again emitted in the room, but this time, the man didn’t fly across the room, instead, Gylbard walked out calmly before nodding at the other guard again. He ran inside before returning with a man in his grasp. He looked young, and quite strong. He had a large chin and square face. The man wore a brown tunic that ran down to nearly touching his feet. His black hair was long, as was his beard. On his face lay a weary look. He had fought-- and fought-- but to no avail.

“My good lord and ladies, it is to my greatest pleasure to introduce you to Aelnoq,” said the chancellor, holding out his hands out towards the others in a grand fashion.

The color from everyone’s face seemed to have drained. Judging by the stick that Gylbard now possessed, this was no ordinary mage. What they were looking at was a great Wizard. These rumored people were, creatures of the Earth itself, that possessed great power in

their bodies. Only three of these great Wizards had supposedly walked the Earth for the last thousands of years.

“I... I don’t believe it,” stuttered the queen of Periodon. “Is it really what I think it is,” exclaimed the king of Maluva.

The man slowly stood up, revealing the heavy chains he had been bound in. Though he was bound, the power emitted from his person was enough to make any of the others quiver in fear, but not Gylbard. He slowly approached the man and started walking circles around him, almost daring the Wizard to do something.

“But... How is this possible?” said the king of Treeslov.

“That’s no matter to you, good lord. What does matter is that I have control over the man and he will be the reason that we win the war this time,” said the chancellor.

Everyone stood in awe as they even moved a little closer to the man, except Virago and Mortek. They had seen what it had taken to suppress the creature and nothing brought greater fear than the thought of being in combat with him.

“If you think that this is all it will take to complete what your own father could not, you are mistaken chancellor. Endridge has a Wizard of its own. This battle will achieve nothing and history will repeat itself. It’s a wonder how a sensible man like your father managed to raise a son that is so stubborn he doesn’t realize his own stupidity. I came aboard this vessel trusting you and your decisions but it seems you are a fool!” snapped the king of Treeslov.

The minute chatter that had been in the room came to a halt and all eyes were on Gylbard. He had not moved a muscle and was now looking back at the king with cold eyes, who looked uncomfortable himself, realizing what he had just said. Fool.

“I-,” tried the lord, but before he could finish his sentence, a flash of light erupted in the room. The boat rocked back and forth and the rocks from the wall began to crumble. As this flurry of events passed, everyone noticed the king was gone. Not a dust of his person remained in the spot where he had once stood. Gylbard stood with his hand outstretched. The Wizard looked up at him with disgust, but there was nothing that he could do. He was helpless at this point. Everyone else in the room also diverted their eyes knowing what had happened. The chancellor had killed someone without the blink of an eye. This time, no murmurs began in the room. The only sound that could be heard was of the waves crashing up against the side of the castle. Everyone was in complete silence.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, your highnesses. I did not intend to have such rude company with us this evening,” said Gylbard, lowering his hand and moving back towards the table. “And congratulations to General Mortek, the newest member of the council of the northern kingdoms.”

With this, he started a slow clap that echoed across the vastly empty halls. Looking around nervously, the others started clapping as well, not wanting to disrespect the chancellor who they now feared more than the Wizard himself.

“Let this also be a lesson the rest of you. Do not compare me to my father. He was a coward who fell to that wretched kingdom of Endridge. He was weak, and I do not choose to follow his pathetic legacy, but rather shape one of my own,” exclaimed the chancellor, pointing to the Wizard with those last words. “With him, we are leveling the field of play. If they have a Wizard, then now so do we.”

The front doors of the castle suddenly burst open as a guard standing outside rushed in. Everyone turned their attention to him, the shock of the death of the Treeslovian king not yet gone. "Sir, we have arrived," he said, standing slightly out of the way to reveal the quiet village of Folsele. The whole land seemed level and cottages dotted the grassy plains. There were small rolling hills all over the area, with livestock and farmland placed strategically near water. A central path seemed to cut through the center of town, which seemed to lead to a small market on the front side. Towering over the back of Folsele was a canopy of enormous trees. The whole of the town was asleep, except the insects of the night, and it seemed the arrival of the council had gone unnoticed.

"If your majesties would kindly wait here, I will be right back," said Gylbard, glad of their silent arrival. He motioned towards the other two Viserwens who followed Gylbard outside into the full moon, bringing the Wizard behind with them. As they walked, Gylbard ahead and Mortek, Virago, and the Wizard, the gates opened up ahead of them. The full moon night illuminated the path as they stepped off onto the beach. Turning around, Gylbard noticed again the spectacle that was the floating fortress. It loomed so tall and powerful as if it were meant for the greatest of leaders, which Gylbard considered himself to be anyway.

"It is time Wizard," Gylbard said tossing the wand over to the man, who grabbed it mid flight. And with three words, the chancellor brought the peaceful town of Folsele to complete and utter chaos. "Destroy the village."

The Wizard tried with no avail to resist the request, but it was as if a force bound him to abide by the chancellor's wishes, which in a way it did. Raising his still chained hand toward the sky, the man closed his eyes. He focused his energy to travel through the whole of his body and

into the wand. A bolt of lightning shot out from the tip of the wand as the air surrounding the small band started to circle faster and faster. Suddenly, large boulders fell from the sky pummeling homes and streets. Large bursts of flames also erupted around them, catching fire onto the many fields and the expansion of trees. Large hairy creatures burst out from the edge of the woods and chased into people's homes. The chancellor looked around at the destruction, feeling pride for what he had accomplished. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck the fortress behind them. Right after, large pieces of rocks pummeled down on the vessel. The Vierwens ducked and looked back at their castle in confusion and fear. They rushed away in front of the Wizard who stood his ground, not wavering for a second. The royal members had run outside the castle and jumped into the freezing waters below. Guards on the beach jumped in to save them, without a moment of hesitation.

“What have you done Wizard!” Mortek cried out as he readied a sword for a blow. Quickly, Gylbard put a hand over Mortek's weapon before saying, “NO! If you attack him now the spell stops as well. He attacked our ship because it fell within the borders of Folsele. Well Wizard, before you have any more smart ideas, I require the safety of any creature of the North Continent on this land.” A giant boulder which was barreling down towards the party immediately changed its directions in mid air and fell in the deep waters behind them. The group ducked immediately, realizing their death had just been avoided by a second.

Gylbard smiled as he once more looked at the destruction of the town. Once this village was level, they could start their preparations for building the camp. The chancellor would finally complete what his father couldn't. The Wizard's face scrunched up in pain as he looked away from the carnage he was unleashing. Screams of the villagers filled the air as more monsters

emerged from the woods. Skeletons, Egants, and large serpents swept across the land destroying anything in their paths.

Suddenly, an arrow whizzed towards the group piercing the paper that was held in Morteck's hand, the map of their attack, and bringing it down into the water. The Viserwens, who had felt safe after Gylbard's last request, suddenly flushed and crashed down towards the ground.

"Wizard, I said protect us," cried Gylbard as he looked over to the man confused on why an attack had been allowed on them. Morteck and Virago immediately shielded the chancellor as the Wizard replied, "No harm has come to any of you," in a gruff voice that emulated his pain and power simultaneously. Gylbard peeked over the small barricade the two other Viserwens had created for him and saw an old man who bolted towards the edge of the forest.

"I want him dead! No matter what," yelled Gylbard over the sound of both screaming victims and monsters alike. The Wizard looked over at Gylbard, looking frustrated and agitated beyond means, but still being forced to listen. A band of the hairy monsters got atop some horses and followed the man into the woods.

At this moment, Virago noticed a splashing in the water behind her, but with the intense heat of the flaming ship, from which she shielded her face and the fact that it was still the dead of night, saw nothing. Although, the map which had lay lazily atop the water was now missing.

Gylbard seemed to have noticed this too as he realized what had happened. Someone had stolen the map from right behind them. His brows furrowed up at the thought of their plan getting revealed. Whipping his head over to the right, he noticed a man sprinting towards the forest, at an immensely fast rate, and in his hand was a piece of parchment.



### **CHAPTER 3: Friend or Foe**

Curmo struggled to keep up as the man walked in large strides ahead of them up the hill to Curmo's cottage. Him and Bella ran after, very confused about what had happened. Behind them lay the dead body of the creature Akuldra had slain, a gashing cut down its stomach. Curmo still shuddered thinking how close he had been to dying-- just like the other knight. If it hadn't been for this stranger....

"Where do you... come from.. good sir?" questioned Bella between breaths as they approached the house. It was nearing midday and the merciless sun was beating down on them. Bella looked up at the man, waiting for a response, but none came. Although, if he had just arrived, it would have been from the north meaning he came from... No, but that was impossible, wasn't it?

As they entered the cottage the man looked around, slightly disappointed by the bareness of the place. He was used to living in a large two story cottage. Folsele had been a richer land than what Belveyon appeared to be.

As Curmo and Bella stood at the doorway, hands on their hips feeling really tired, they looked at each other, wondering the same thing. Who was this valiant knight that had slain this beast but had also come into their house uninvited. They both looked at him properly for the first time just then. The man had long flowing blonde hair that came down to his shoulders. His face was scruffy and was covered in stubbles. The man's eyes were a spectacle. They were deep red down to the iris. He was a very muscular man who had obviously spent many years training. Over his body was draped a vest with pockets and small pouches dangling over the sides. His clothing looked very heavy, but the man carried it with ease.

As he turned around, the kids could see the look on his face, one of impatience and deep turmoil together. In his right hand he held a piece of parchment which had a hole right in the center of it. From what little Curmo could see, it looked like some kind of map.

“Sir, thank you for saving my life. I am forever indebted to you,” Curmo said, trying to maintain the civility in the room. The man didn’t seem to have any himself. He waved a hand as if trying to convey he didn’t much care for this and responded, “I hear you are to go to Endridge. I was looking for an escort there myself and you will have to take me.”

“But sir,” cut in Bella, “The knight was Curmo’s escort to the Endridge market. His death was just announced. Curmo won’t be able to make the journey.” She knew very well of the dangers that the paths to Endrige held. Without a knight, Curmo was sure to face great adversity.

“Aye, if that is so then I shall be your escort to Endridge,” said the man. “We must leave at once.”

Curmo looked confused as he looked between the man, Bella, and back at the creature that had just tried to kill him, “Um.. sir, have you by any chance... COMPLETELY LOST YOUR MIND!?”

Bella looked at him wide eyed. Akuldra cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow, looking at the child that was barely half his size talking back to him.

“Curmo, don’t be rude. He’s our guest. Besides he did save your-,” said Bella under her breath as she leaned in, right before Curmo quickly put a hand up to silence her.

“Today I woke up thinking everything was going to be fine. I was excited to finally leave for Endridge. I go to the market without the escort coming the whole day. When he finally does he comes dead! For the first time in decades, the Cobali come to Belveyon and warn us of

monsters near the village. Monsters that killed a knight. Then I find out I can't go to Endridge because of the knight's death and Muralen sends me home. On the way me and Bella run into that thing and I almost DIE! Then a man, who I don't even know, that saves me is a rude prick that barges into people's homes. Even then he thinks I'm still going to be going to Endridge after all that's happened. So yes Bella, I'm sorry if I'm being a little rude."

The whole room grows silent as Curmo stares at the ground, blinking back tears that were threatening to fall down his face. Bella stared at him, shocked at what he'd just said. The man forms a slight grin on his face, seeing how Curmo responded to his words. The tension slowly diminishes as Curmo realizes what he had just said and looks up at the man apologetically.

"I didn't mean-," Curmo started. Akuldra holds out a hand and stops him. "I understand your fear boy. It's alright to be afraid of the creatures out there..." Curmo starts to smile, glad that the man understood.

"If you were a maiden like your friend here," he said, pointing to Bella.

Curmo's smile immediately drops and his hatred for Akuldra starts to grow again. He looks over at Bella who is staring at the floor, but can't hold back a smile at Curmo's expense. This makes his cheeks grow red hot as he angrily stares back up at the man.

"Listen boy. I don't have much time," said Akuldra. "The northern continent has invaded Folsele. They have a Wizard who's controlling the monsters. The dentron that your escort encountered was sent to kill me. I have to get this paper to Endridge. It indicates the battle plan for what I believe will be the second continental war. We have to get to Endridge as soon as we can. The fate of the entire western continent depends on it."

It was as if the air from the room was immediately sucked out. There was a lot of information Akuldra had dropped on the kids at once.

“You’re... You’re from Folsele?” questioned Bella. The man nodded. The kids had never met a Folselean. The land was surrounded by monsters and the only way to get out was through the Folsele forest, but it was riddled with dentron and other creatures. No one had been known to get in or out of the land in... well ever, as far as the kids knew. From what they had heard, Folsele was a monster infested land. The nights were riddled with creatures roaming the streets. Everyday people slept only after barring every window and door leading into their homes. This just left one for question, a more important one....

“Wait I’m sorry, did you say there was an invasion at Folsele?” gushed Curmo.

“Aye boy. I don’t know much more than that but we have to get to Endridge if we want to warn them. I have never been out of Folsele myself, so I’ll need a guide there,” explained Akuldra.

“Well if they have found a Wizard themselves then we don’t have much time,” said Bella looking up at the man.

The man nodded, appreciating Bella’s urgency to the situation that Curmo didn’t seem to be understanding. “You’re a quick lass aren’t you?” Akuldra acknowledged.

Curmo whipped his head towards her asking, “What do you mean we? Didn’t you hear what the man just said? The Wizard sent monsters after him. If we go with him that’ll just mean the death of us as well. No I’ll just point the way there for you sir and you can make the journey yourself.”

Akuldra looked back at him, puzzled. “If I could make the journey myself, boy, trust me I would. Your company doesn’t entice me in any way. Like you said, there are monsters after me, and I am already injured. After seeing you back there with the dentron I saw it for the first time. You’re a magical being yourself. I’ll need you to watch my back.”

For the first time, Curmo was left speechless. Bella turned her face towards Curmo, wide eyed with her mouth hanging slightly open. Curmo himself looked shaken. “But how’s that even possible? I’m not a mage. I - I can’t do any magic.”

Akuldra looked at the children before slightly nodding. Akuldra knew the instant he had seen Curmo’s green hair and eyes that he was a being of magic. Looking around, his eyes met the large table at the center of the room. “You may want to sit down for this. There is something you need to know.”

The two made their way over to the table and silently sat down as Akuldra sat down in front of them. Bella blinked several times before looking at Curmo again. He looked different in her eyes for the first time. His deep green hair seemed to glow an unnatural amount. No one knew why he had green hair. He had gotten it from his mother with whom he had shared features. They stood out now, more than ever before.

“You see boy, magical creatures have roamed the world for as long as it has existed. The Earth grants power to those that choose to protect her. There is a religion as old as time called (Terramencia?). Those that followed the religion knew the Earth was alive. They could feel the heartbeat of every tree to every rolling hill.”

“The Earth granted abilities to those that lived on its surface and worshipped it. First, there were the three Wizards. They were granted unimaginable power. These Wizards have been

alive since before any of the first kingdoms were formed. One, as you know, resides now in Endridge. The other two had been gone up until now, up until the invasion. That was the first time another Wizard has been found. The third is yet to be found. These Wizards helped the Earth and the people on it. They created bridges across vast rivers and paved trails across the continent in an instant.”

Although, they couldn’t be at every corner of the world at once. For this reason, they granted magical abilities to humans and made the first mages. Hundreds of mages roamed the Earth, populating it, helping create the foundations of the first kingdoms. Some of them, though, were selfish with their power. They turned their enemies they hated into hideous creatures forced to roam the Earth as monsters. These beasts would kill and rob humans, ransack homes, and destroy villages. Other mages created beings of good magic, formed from love and to better the world. From this, creatures like Aeloridans were born. Aeloridians are the flying men that live on the great archipelago.”

The Earth disliked the first kind of mages and banished them to the North of the continent, but couldn’t move all of their creatures to the other side as well. The giant continent at this point split and all the dark mages were separated by a sea of unforgiving water, one that could only calm by the help of a wizard. This gave rise to the Northern continent. Unfortunately, a few mages were left in the western continent and they stayed hidden in Folsele, creating more and more creatures of evil. To protect the rest of the world, the Earth separated Folsele from the rest of the world with a forest filled with these monsters. Those living in Folsele had to fend for themselves and they fought with all their might to survive the hordes of creatures. The mages

here were eventually slain and no one had heard from the northern continent until the great continental war.”

Anyway, you boy, are a creature of good magic. Judging by the green in your hair and eyes, you are the son of a Pertur. Perturs are also followers of Terramencia. Most of them reside in the forest of the reborn now. Looking back at how the dentron looked at you, I could tell. If the creature wanted you dead, it would have killed you in an instant. Perturs have the ability to speak to and control the creatures that roam this planet. You are a being of the most pure form of magic, the magic of the Earth.”

“Whoa,” whispered Curmo, looking down at his own hands. His whole life, he’d worked with animals and he always kind of knew he could feel them. It was almost like he had understood them. Even when going to the market, Curmo felt the need to go through the woods rather than taking the main path. He’d always just convinced himself that it was the shorter path that appealed to him. Even back at Muralen’s barn, Curmo had raised an actual dragon! Not many people could say that for themselves. It was all starting to make sense. He had magic. He was magic.

“If you come with me boy, I can train you. Trust me, I know what it’s like to have all of this thrown at you would feel like to learn about your powers for the first time. I felt the same way when my father told me,” said Akuldra. He blinked a few times and stared down at the ground feeling a sense of despair.

Confused, Bella said, “Wait, you’re a magical being as well?” snapping Akuldra out of his daze. He looked up at her and said, “Aye girl. I’m a deviant. It was passed down from my father to me. A mage had merged his soul with that of the giant creatures called Egants.”

“What? You’re a deviant!” said Bella as she jumped up. The children had heard of these sacred creatures as well. They lived atop mountains and in far away valleys. Deviants were known to avoid contact with humans. Their immense strength and power made them dangerous as well. This was the first time Curmo had ever before seen one in person. All he could remember had heard were stories of men going out to hunt the deviants. They never made and not making it back alive.

“You can calm down,” said Akuldra nonchalantly as he stood up as well. “I’m not going to hurt you. I don’t know what you know of our species but only fight those trying to kill us.” He now stepped towards the door to peek outside. “But we must go soon, the monsters grow closer.” At that moment, a loud sound rang throughout the hills of Belveyon. A horn had been sounded.

Akuldra, looking confused, stepped back away from the door and asked Curmo, “What was that?”

Peering out the window, Curmo responded, “The warning sound has been played. It’s only meant for imminent danger. Sounds like your monsters have raided the village.”

Akuldra’s brows scrunched up as he realised they were going to be in great trouble.

“The first thing I must ask boy, if I leave for Endridge, will you join me?” asked Akuldra. They didn’t have any more time, he needed an answer now.

“Yes, we will,” responded Bella, stepping forward. She smiled at Akuldra, trying to avoid eye contact with Curmowith over at Curmo, who was glaring right back at her.

“Bella, it's going to be very dangerous. If there are monsters roaming the continent looking for this man, we’re going to be followed all the way to Endridge,” said Curmo, still unsure of whether or not he should go himself.



“Curmo, we have to help in any way we can. Didn’t you hear what he just said? The northern continents have invaded again. Frankly, I think I’d feel a lot safer with you two than here.”

“Then I can go myself! You have a family here, you can’t just leave them,” refuted Curmo. Muralen had told Curmo tales of his own travels to Endridge-- and most of them involved nearly getting killed. He barely wanted to go himself, much less take responsibility for Bella.

“You heard the alarm ring for the first time ever just now. That’s probably the first time it has ever rung. If the northern continent is really going to attack now, my family will only be safe when they are stopped. Besides, I can’t stay here without doing anything.”

Curmo sighed looking at Bella’s pleading face up to Akuldra’s serious one. Shaking his head he looked down. Has his whole life been a lie? His whole life had been a lie. Not knowing who he was. Now the world was at stake and a deviant was asking for his help. Even though he wanted to refute the idea and stay in Belveyon, Curmo knew nothing was ever going to be the same again. He needed to go. And Bella, well she was a headstrong person who wouldn’t take no for an answer. Looking up at Akuldra, Curmo reluctantly said, “So, when do you want to leave?”

Akuldra smiled down at him, glad he was going to have some help on this journey while Bella jumped with glee behind him and squealed, “Yes! We’re going to save everyone!”

Moving towards the door, beckoning the others behind him, Akuldra said, “We must go now. If we get our horses soon we can leave before nightfall and clear this infested town. But, you two need to be extremely quiet.”

“We can go to get to Muralen’s shop. There are horses there that we can take with us. Although, I don’t know why we would leave when there are savage creatures prowling the streets,” Curmo said pointing out towards the marketplace.

“Perfect, we can begin the ride today,” said Bella, making her way over to Akuldra, ignoring the warning Curmo had just given. Curmo, consequently, grumbled annoyedly before following behind them.

The party stepped out into the light. It was getting dark now, the sun starting to peek back behind the plains across the village. Curmo could smell the thick and heavy summer air which carried the scent of the budding flowers across the valleys. The whole world seemed silent. The only thing one could hear was the blowing of the wind across the high peaks of the mountain range. Low growls could be heard down in the streets. It didn’t seem like a good idea to be out. Especially since it was getting dark, but deep down Curmo knew that they had to move fast if they were to get to Endridge before it was too late.

Akuldra inched forward, moving with such precision and silence that Curmo, who was waddling right behind could barely even see or hear him. His red eyes glowed in the night sky like those of wolves. He seemed like a complete animal. Bella started at Akuldra intensely now, knowing the kind of person he was. Belveyon had had many visitors who had tried to hunt down Deviants. Akuldra didn’t seem to be aware of the reputation his species had left on the rest of the world. Groups of over one hundred people have come back wounded, with some dead, when trying to slay these creatures. The immense power of an Egant, one of the largest creatures that roamed the planet, squeezed into the body of a trained knight was a dangerous thing. Bella shuddered, not knowing if she completely trusted him.

They moved past the main road this time, as to avoid the woods where a dentron had been. There was not a soul in the path going to the market. All you could hear was the sound of families boarding up the doors and windows from the inside. The constant growling noise was always present though. Looking beyond the edge towards the trees, you could see the dentron circling around the whole Village, as to make sure Akuldra didn't escape. This didn't make sense, why wouldn't they come into town looking for him.

Akuldra motioned for the other two to follow him and broke out into a full sprint towards the market. Curmo looked at Bella confused, before running right behind him, or at least attempting to. Akuldra ducked between two large stalls and waited for the kids, who caught up eventually.

"I thought we were supposed to be silent," whispered Curmo over to Akuldra. Just like before when they were making their way up to Curmo's house, the kids were already out of breath while Akuldra looked as if he had barely moved.

"The dentron are circling the village. They're not trying to hunt me down. They're just trying to keep me from getting to Endridge. It must be the Wizard controlling them," said Akuldra, realizing the same thing Curmo did now. Getting out would be a near impossibility. They were counting on the dentron searching the whole village so they could sneak past the borders of the village, but now if they tried to leave, they would be overcome by the rest in moments. The only way across would be... wait that was it!

"I know a way we can get out," said Curmo, dashing towards the pen where Muralen kept the horses. He heard Akuldra and Bella running behind him. As he made his way into the clearing between the marketplace and the large mountain range, Curmo suddenly stopped. To his

right, some distance away, there was another creature, like the one that had attacked Curmo. It was sniffing around in the air, its head on a swivel, trying to spot something. Curmo looked back, worried as to what they could do.

“Slow down boy! Like I said, we can’t get out without alerting the rest of the creatures. There is no point in going to the barn,” Akuldra said, pointing to the barn in the distance.

“We don’t have to go by horse,” said Curmo, looking back to see if the dentron had spotted them at all. It had not.

“You’re not making any sense, Curmo,” said Bella, looking worried at the prospect of encountering the creature again. “You want us to ride Muralen’s donkey? The only other livestock Muralen sells is cows and pigs, so that’s not much better.”

Curmo shook his head, looking directly at the two now. “There’s another animal in there that Muralen and I have. I’ve been raising it for some time now and I think it may be big enough to carry us outside the border of Belveyon. A dragon.”

“Are you insane!” exclaimed Akuldra, still talking under his breath to avoid getting the creature’s attention. “Besides you barely know how to control your powers, you can’t control a beast of dark magic! It’ll kill us all.”

“Zenvor would never do that. She’s a friend and I trust her. Bella, do you trust me?,” Curmo said looking over at Bella who seemed as shocked as Akuldra. Curmo had been raising a dragon? There was just too much information for her to process today.

“While I don’t know much about magic or beasts, I trust you Curmo. If you think the dragon is safe then I think so too.”

They both looked at Akuldra. He was processing his options on getting out of this place. It would be an impossibility by any other means. No matter how absurd it sounded, they would need to ride the dragon to get out of the village. It was the only way.

Akuldra looked over at the dentron, who seemed as oblivious as ever.

“Alright listen. On my signal, you two run for the barn. Boy, get the dragon ready to fly. These creatures are highly powerful and grow quickly so it should be able to carry us, if it doesn’t fry us first. I’m going to distract the dentron. Once I kill it, the others will be on us in minutes. We need to be in the air fast.”

Bella and Curmo looked down at the ground, absorbing the instructions that were thrown at them. This would be very difficult, but they had to do it for the sake of protecting the western continent. Bella nodded over at Akuldra while Curmo got ready to run.

“3... 2... NOW RUN!” yelled Akuldra as the two bolted for the barn. The dentron’s head whipped in their direction as it began galloping its horse towards them. The creature let out a ferocious howl to alert the others. Akuldra heard the other howls and his blood ran cold, remembering his father and how he himself had barely managed to escape. Shaking out of his daze, he jumped out from behind the bard and shouted at the creature, “Come get me you filthy animal!” Seeing Akuldra, the creature changed course and the horse began running faster directly towards Akuldra. As the beast neared it pulled out its claws and leaned over the side of the horse as to strike him. Akulda took a side step to his left just as the beast approached and grabbed its arm from right behind, pulling it off its horse. The beast yelped in surprise as it fell off its steed and rolled across the ground. With one swift motion, Akuldra unsheathed his sword and cut off the creature’s arm that he was holding, right before burying his blade into the dentron’s skull.

This time, though, instead of praying for the beast's life, Akuldra spit on the lifeless body and said, "That's for my father."

Looking around, Akuldra saw the other dentron approaching them from a distance. Luckily for them, Akuldra didn't see any with arrows or quivers. He now ran for the barn where Curmo had hopefully readied the beast.

Akuldra burst into the barn and saw Curmo trying to calm the dragon who seemed disturbed by the sound of the creatures outside. He marveled at the creature, whose size and menacing looks made even the deviant nervous. It shook its head now, calming down to Curmo stroking its sides. The dragon let out short bursts of screeches, like that of an eagle. Bella stood by Curmo's side, more intrigued than fearful of the dragon. The kids hadn't seen what Akuldra had to know what a dragon was capable of. Regardless, he approached them, and the beast.

"Boy we need to go now. Will the creature fly?" Curmo had now managed to completely calm the creature who now pressed its large horns against Curmo's body.

"Well yes of course. She's a dragon. She'll fly." said Curmo, taking a step on the creature's leg to jump over its body. Outside the dentron could be heard, louder now. They had nearly surrounded the barn. It was going to be close if they wanted to make it out of here alive.

Reaching down towards Bella, Curmo pulled her atop the dragon behind himself. Akuldra looked at the creature, hesitating to trust it, before finally jumping on its back himself. The dragon whipped its tail across the ground as it moved slowly towards the opening of the barn.

"Why isn't she flying?" said Akudra looking up at Curmo who seemed confused with what he was doing. The dragon's wings flapped slowly, but not as strong as it needed to have.

“Well I’ve never actually flown her before,” said Curmo lightly. “Come on girl, you got this.” he pointed up at the sky and tried kicking the creatures sides, which only resulted in the dragon fraying more.

“WHAT!” yelled Akuldra, realizing the weight of the situation. “Well, do it now! Listen to me boy, you have the power to control the beast. Just close your eyes and try to speak to it,” said Akuldra.

“I’ve never used my powers before! I don’t think I can do it!” screamed Curmo back at Akuldra. The dentron had now approached the barn and were banging on its sides. One that found its way to the entrance got stomped on by Zenvor who seemed quite annoyed at the creatures herself.

“Listen to me Curmo!” said Bella, trying to shout over the sound of the savage dentron and Zenvor’s screeching. “You can do it. You’ve calmed down the most wild animals Muralen had brought into his barn. You don’t have to believe in yourself, because I believe in you.” Curmo looked back at her reassuring face. The dentron were breaking through the wooden frame of the barn now. It was now or never.

Curmo took a deep breath and closed his eyes. The sounds around him seemed to fade as he focused on his relationship with Zenvor, how he’d found her in the plains and brought her to the barn. How he’d fed her and raised her to become the dragon she now was. He placed a hand over Zenvor’s head and felt her soul. The energy from the Earth seemed to flow through him. He thought now of soaring through the clouds; Zenvor’s giant body flying and gliding between air currents. The ground below him shook as the whole barn was filled with the air from Zenvor’s powerful wings. The animals in the barn were whining and squealing. Suddenly, Curmo’s

stomach lurched as the beast took to the air. Curmo opened his eyes as Zenvor burst through the front of the barn, leaving a giant, gaping hole where the door had once been. He grabbed onto her scales as she flew straight upwards. He felt dizzy as the immense weight and power of the creature was finally being realized. Curmo felt a rush of wind on his face as he closed his eyes and buried his face in the dragon's neck.

Bella was holding onto Curmo tightly, her eyes also closed. Behind her, Akuldra had his arms wrapped around the base of the creature's large tail, nearly falling off. He was looking down at the carnage below. The dentron were riding their horses towards the dragon at full gallop but it was of no use.

“WHOOOO! WE DID IT!” shouted Bella looking down back at the creatures following them. She looked over at the village now, which was coming into full view. Though Bella didn't want to leave behind her family, Akuldra and Curmo were going to need all the help they could get. Besides, her family would never be safe until they managed to stop the northern continent.

“WELL DONE BOY!” yelled Akuldra from behind. He was laughing and cheering as they soared higher in the sky. It was completely dark now. The sun had set under the sea and they seemed to be flying towards the near full moon. Curmo sneaked a peek down at the world below him. He had done it! He had used his power and gotten Zenvor to fly.

“Good girl!” he said, patting the beast on its neck. Zenvor screeched happily as she was also flying for the first time.

As the dragon leveled off overhead, heading in the direction of Endridge, Akuldra looked over to his right, to spot the forest of Akuldra in flames. Angrily, Akuldra remembered the screaming of his villagers the night he had escaped. In the far distance, he could see a bright



white light breaking through the sky like lightning going upwards. In the far distance, they could see a giant fleet of ships on the Folsean border. Curmo shuddered thinking about the war that was inevitably going to ensue. He only hoped he would be far enough from it.

#### **CHAPTER 4: Wall of Flames**

The roaring of the constant fire echoed throughout the valley as the northern tents were being set up in the town of Folsele. Gylbard was sitting at his table surrounded by the council who were drenched from jumping into the water. Standing by his side was Virago, whose head was down. A man in the background could be heard choking. It was Aelnoq.

“You see, wizard, there are consequences for those that do not listen to me or disobey me. You not only tried to kill us, you let the other man get away,” said Gylbard in a slow menacing voice. He didn’t tend to scream or yell, but every word he uttered held power and importance. He turned around now to face Aelnoq. His face was completely battered. Drops of blood were immediately soaked up as it fell from his face. One of his eyes was so bruised it was completely forced shut. His hand was now around his neck. He was choking himself. His fingers themselves were all bent in odd directions and his leg looked horribly broken, that you could see the bone. The curse of the wizard was that he could not die. He was not permitted to die, Gylbard wouldn’t allow it. He could also endure much more pain and torture than the average man. Especially now, after doing all that he had done, Aelnoq willed for death to come swiftly.

The council all had their heads down. The sight of the hurting wizard was enough to put anyone at unease. On top of that, the image of everyone still remembered how Gylbard killing had killed the king at his displeasure was still fresh in his mind when he was displeased. Not

only were they scared of the sacred creature in front of them, they were afraid of what Gylbard was capable of, now that he had power over this sacred creature.

“Release yourself now,” said Gylbard as Aelnoq immediately let go of his throat and gasped wildly attempting to grasp the soil from under his hand, but not being able to because of the condition he was in.

“Look at this creature yourself, ladies and gentlemen! What could he possibly do to us in his state! You have nothing to fear from him!” shouted Gylbard towards the council, which resulted in a few of them flinching. They weren’t afraid of the wizard, not that they would tell Gylbard this. In fact, each and every one of them had a question they wanted to ask the chancellor, but were afraid to. How could he have subdued and controlled the creature? How would an all powerful wizard have allowed himself to be captured by a human? The thought of this itself was enough to make a man shiver.

Turning his attention now back to the guards that were standing outside their tent, Gylbard commanded them, “Go round up the remaining survivors and bring in the general.” The three of them nodded before immediately dashing out. Facing away from the council’s table now, Gylbard removed the mask over his face and readjusted the strap around the back of his neck. This got Virago to look up, who stared at the man’s face. How was it possible that...

Gylbard turned back around, the mask properly aligned over his face as the general came back inside the tent.

“Your highness,” he said with a bow, “There are about fifty villagers remaining. The rest were either slaughtered or ran through the forest, which promises means death regardless either way.”

Gylbard nodded as he made his way across the room, beckoning Virago to follow him. They both stepped out into the damp air of Folsele. Looking upon the village, they could clearly see the destruction they had caused. Nearly every house had either been destroyed or it had collapsed. Virago looked upon the sight too, but not with pleasure. She frowned slightly, looking at what they had done to this small town. Though she knew what they did was a necessity, it hurt her just a little to see the destruction of such a prosperous and quaint place.

“If I may ask, Gylbard,” said Virago without hesitation. She didn’t address him with a formal title like the others did. The other councilmen didn’t know Gylbard the way she did. HTo her, he was an old friend, not just a leader. “Why did we have to destroy everything?. I mean couldn’t we have left everything intact and the people-- would have still feared us?”

“Oh Virago, you don’t understand anything, do you,” responded Gylbard without turning to her. She looked sheepishly away. “I don’t care about the people. I don’t care about respect or fear from these pathetic villagers. The reason we destroyed the town was because I wanted to see the wizard’s power. I wanted to see the complete chaos and annihilation he could cause. And I must say, I wasn’t disappointed. Except for that man that got away. But besides that, we have the foundation to rebuild our own camp here.” Virago sighed as the surviving villagers were brought to Gylbard’s tent. The attack on Folsele was in vain. Worse, it was just a test.

There was a large band of people of all ages. Old men and women huddled closer to the back and the adults faltered towards the center, holding on to their crying children. Everyone’s face was covered in soot and smog, many of them had been cut and bruised in multiple areas. Some were screaming while others were crying. They looked around at the life they had built,

everything they had once known to be their own, only to be destroyed in the matter of minutes by whoever this creature monster was.

“My fellow Folselean-,” Gylbard began his speech, only to be cut off by a man screaming towards the back who said, “Get the hell out of here you inhuman creature!” Gylbard took a deep breath and closed his eyes, trying really hard to conceal his anger which everyone seemed to be testing today. He made the slightest motion of his hand, which Virago barely noticed from her peripheral vision. She knew exactly what this meant. This man would have to die for what he said. She silently quickly unsheathed her sword and swiftly made her way across the crowd of people.

Those in front stood out of her way. When she approached the man, a woman stood in front of him and placed a hand over her armour plate, begging, “Please don’t! I’ll do anything. He didn’t mean what he said, please don’t kill him!” Clinging to her was a small girl child, maybe around three in age; silent tears fell from the child’s eyes. The manHe looked meekly at her, scared but also pleading with his eyes. The man himself blinked twice before he looked towards the ground, away from his impending doom.

Virago gave a glance back to Gylbard, who didn’t meet her gaze. She was going to have to do it. Virago kneeled down gently to wipe the little girl’s tears. Surprisingly, she didn’t resist. Virago looked back at the man’s wife and smiled, saying, “I’m sorry, sweetheart. It’s either him or me at this point. You might want to look away.” With these words, Virago quickly buried the sword into the man’s chest as he fell to the ground, grasping at his wound. The woman let out a shriek as Virago put her finger over her mouth and said, “Shh. You might want to try to learn from his mistake and be quiet, or I’m afraid it’ll be you next.” The woman went silent, quietly

sobbing as she clutched her child even closer to her chest. She gave a look up to Virago, one of pure hatred and mistrust. It wasn't as if Virago wanted to kill the man. In fact if it were up to her, she probably would have just locked him up. But it wasn't and she couldn't defy Gylbard. Oh well, I'll get over it, thought Virago. Though she didn't think it very convincing. Shrugging, she made her way back over to Gylbard who didn't acknowledge any of what had happened.

The whole crowd had completely gone silent now. Not a single person made a sound. Even the little children, who all now seemed to know the consequences for it.

"If I may so begin now... My fellow Folseleans. I am Gylbard, the chancellor of Viserwen, and soon to be king. I apologize greatly for the inconvenience I have caused you all tonight, but believe me, it's for a good reason. If you all recall, my father once got tangled up in a war with the western continent. The battle droned on for years and he was sent back to the north, whatever, you probably are familiar with know the whole story. W Well we're back to finish what my father never could. HYou see, he was a weak minded person who never used his advantages in battle. He fought with honor and integrity. Well that doesn't really win a war does it? I'd rather play sly and intelligently. Which is why we'll be attacking Endridge once all our forces arrive. The reason I'm explaining this to you is because I will now be offering you a choice. You can either serve me or die. To most, a fairly easy decision, but one not all know how to make properly," said Gylbard, indicating towards the fallen man's body as it bled out on the soil.

The people looked from between one another. They really didn't have a choice. As they all hugged their loved ones, the men all started walking toward the front of the group as one of the men came ahead. He was slightly older than the rest of them, and his hair and beard were

seeing more and more white. "Can I say something to you sir," said the man. Gylbard gave a slight nod. "We Folseleans have always been separated from the rest of the world by this forest. It has been a curse and a gift. Our whole lives have been spent living in this close community. The rich and fertile land has always grown tall and we see the beautiful dolphins along the shore at noon. The Earth has given us a good life. Even when she plagued us with monsters, we were granted two valiant deviants who fought to protect us. We are a people of honor. Aiding you is a sign that we have lost these morals and deceive the same grounds that give us this life. If you are Viserwen, that means you are from the north. You are a people of death and destruction. The western continent will never be yours."

With this, an arrow sailed and struck the man directly on his chest. He looked up to see it had sailed from one of the guard's bows on Gylbard's command. This made him smile as he took a step forward. "You're scared. You're trying to kill me because you're scared. Doesn't matter if you do. These forests will never let you through. Even with our death, you will lose. FOR FOLSELE!" shouted the man as he stormed forward. Behind him, followed the other men that had made their way to the front lines. The women left their babies down and ran after the men. Gylbard took a faltering step back as Virago stepped in front of him. All the guards shot their arrows simultaneously now. The few people that did manage to come close to Gylbard were swiftly killed off by Virago, who she struck down every person. As soon as it had started, the small fight was over.

Mortek rushed out from inside the tent, as did the rest of the council.

“What happened here?” questioned the queen of Maluva as she looked at the dead bodies that littered the floor. “They were foolish,” said Gylbard, who had but a speck of blood on his face.

He looked upon the few children and elderly left in the group, only a batch of about fifteen. They wouldn’t be of any use to him anymore. “Virago, I want you to end them all. Archers, save your arrows for when it’ll matter,” said Gylbard. The remaining people began to beg now, pleading for their lives. Virago went over to Gylbard, and whispered something into his ear, to which Gylbard nodded. Virago went up to the group and said, “Everyone, if you would, please follow me,” going towards the edge of the forest. The Folseleans looked back and saw that they had no choice. They were going to be forced into the forest. Silently, everyone followed Virago.

“Bring out the wizard,” Gylbard commanded Mortek. “Your highnesses, I feel as if I must ask. When are your forces to arrive?,” he said, a little more impatient now, to the rest of the council, who had been awfully silent up until now.

“They should be here in a week’s time,” responded the king of Meertrov, who had been assigned to foresee the advances of the troops across the waters. He really hoped now, more than ever, that they did arrive within this time, or he may face the same fate as those lying at his feet now. Right then, Mortek dragged out Aelnoq from inside the tent. He still looked very battered up and his head was hanging low.

“Heal yourself wizard,” said Gylbard. The wizard looked up at him in confusion as his body began to go back to its original state. His misshapen fingers straightened up and the bones inside began to heal. Even his scars started to close up. Though this process was saving his life, it

was extremely painful. Aelnoq screamed out towards the sky as his body started creating more muscle tissue to replace the lost ones.

He fell to the ground as the process ended, feeling better than ever before. “Now, wizard. This man claims there were only two deviants of Folsele. What does this mean?” Aelnoq looked genuinely confused at this remark. “No. There’s only one. An old friend of mine.”

“That’s the man the dentron killed in the forest, but there was another that got away. Who-- the-- hell-- was-- that,” said Gylbard, putting emphasis on every word. It was obvious he was furious. This other man had gotten out of the forest with his entire battle plan. If he was human, he probably would have died before he made it ten paces from the woods. But a deviant was stronger. The egant binded to its soul wouldn’t let it die so easily.

“There is no other deviant of Folsele! I don’t know of any,” shouted Aelnoq, annoyed at Gylbard’s pestering. “You know I am unable to lie. Then why do you still feel a need to question my words?”

The all- knowing creature was of course correct. Gylbard couldn’t question him any further, but he still needed that deviant found before he caused any trouble. “Send out the monsters, wizard,” said Gylbard. “More than you ever have before. An entire army of monsters. I want that man dead.”

The creatures that were waiting at the edge of the forest immediately dashed out of the woods, running at full pace towards the mountain range. Gylbard thought now of what he had to do, as Virago returned.

“It’s done,” said Virago cheerily. “Those rascals got ripped apart faster than I’ve ever seen before. If we’re to make it through that forest, it’s going to be difficult.”



Gylbard nodded, thinking back to what the Folselean had said before. The forest wasn't going to allow them to get through. There were too many creatures in the forest. Even if they forced their way across, there would be too many casualties and this would bring down their numbers, which wouldn't be going up for another week.

"Wizard, remove the monsters from the forest," said Gylbard, demandingly to Aelnoq. Aelnoq shook his head, for the first time, defying Gylbard's wishes. Gylbard's eyes flashed with anger. He took a few menacing step towards Aelnoq, who was standing up now. "You know that's not a choice! You have to do as I ask of you," said Gylbard.

"Even I cannot defy the will of the Earth. She built this forest for the protection of the rest of the world. I gain my powers from her and her alone. I don't have the ability to destroy this forest even if I tried. As long as the creatures in those forests have a home, the trees must remain" said Aelnoq, curling his face into a slight smile, amusedglad that Gylbard wasn't getting what he wanted for the first time.

"Then I know what I must do," said Gylbard as he made his way behind the tent to a small camp of guards that were sitting down. "What the hell are you doing," said Glybard as they shot straight up like a bullet, a hand over their head in a salute.

"Sorry sir, we were taking a break. The camps have been set up," said the guard that was standing in the center of the group. Gylbard stood there for a few moments letting them all realize how angry he was. "Let me give you some motivation to work. If you don't, I will kill you," said Gylbard, to which the guard in the front gulped uneasily. "What can we do for you, sir?" he said now, nervously.

“I want to torch the forest. Bring every man you can find to the edge of those woods. Burn the whole thing down to a crisp. I don’t want to see a single green leaf in that place,” explained Gylbard, exemplifying how important this job was for him and the mission. The guards all nodded, picked up a torch and started marching towards the woods.

Gylbard started making his easy back over to Aelnoq. “Problem solved,” said Gylbard, with a hint of sarcasm. Aelnoq looked over at the men who were running towards the forest. “No... no you can’t do that,” he said, his heart pounding against his chest. “Trust me, you don’t want to do this. Don’t upset the Earth, she’ll make you pay.”

Gylbard smiled now, realizing how desperate Aelnoq sounded. “Oh how absolutely terrifying. Except, THE EARTH ISN’T ALIVE!” he suddenly shouted. This even got Mortek to flinch slightly. In the distance, a small red flame could be seen, burning at the edge of the forest. It had begun. There was no going back now. Aelnoq closed his eyes and put his hands over the grass under him, kneeling with his eyes closed. He could feel the weeping of every tree in the woods. In fact, a tear now trickled down his face.

Virago was the first one to notice this. She began to laugh as she went over to Aelnoq. “Aww, the poor wizard’s sad now is he? Can’t he handle a little fire?” She said, kicking Aelnoq slightly on his sides.

Aelnoq could not express the extent of the pain he felt. “I’m sorry mother, for I have failed you,” he said to the Earth. He put his palm on the burnt grass. The sound of thunder could be heard in the distance as clouds began forming over them. A storm was coming, and it was meant to kill. The flames were wider now, taking over whole trees, absorbing the whole land in its explosive chaos. There was a wall of flames now, and large masses of black smoke wafter

towards the sky. A flock of birds flew away from the scene and the loud roar of the fire picked up across the village.

Gylbard saw the clouds rolling in from the distance, though. The rain would definitely distinguish the fire if it came in. “Wizard, make my fire never ending. A kind that cannot be extinguished. I do not ask you to harm the Earth, so you cannot refuse,” said Gylbard through clenched teeth. Aelnoq nodded slightly, as the flames grew brighter and emitted a slightly white light.

“Now the only problem that remains is this deviant. In fact, Virago, I want you to go after him. You are my most trusted soldier. I hope, for your sake, that you don’t fail.” Virago smiled giving a slight bowing before asking, “How will I get to him though? On foot?” Gylbard stroked his chin, before turning to Mortek, and said, “I want you to bring it out, now,” to which Mortek began running towards the now repaired--, thanks to Aelnoq--, floating fortress.

As returned, Virago was riding a large two legged creature with ferocious, killer eyes. “I won’t disappoint you, Gylbard,” she said as the creature leaped into the air and started burrowing into the ground. It rapidly went below ground and started following the trail towards the deviant.

Suddenly, an eagle of massive proportion flew down towards Gylbard. Tied to its leg was a small note. Gylbard reached his hand out to which the bird flew to immediately. It had flown the same course for the past year many times. From Endridge to Folsele was a constant flight and truthfully, it was only meant for this day. “Ah, my message has arrived,” said Gylbard as he opened the note and read its content. “What is it my lord,” said the queen of Peridon as she made her way over to him. Gylbard rolled up the note, put it in his pocket and began to chuckle. A slow laugh slowly grew into enormous guffaws. Mortek raised his eyebrows towards the

chancellor. The last time he had seen him this happy was when he received the news that his father had died in war.

“The wizard of Endridge is sick. He is dying. Endridge will be defenseless now. We have practically won!” shouted Gylbard. This resulted in the cheering of every man near them. The council itself began clapping and cheering. Mortek raised his weapon and started the chant, “DEATH TO ENDRIDGE!” which picked up amongst the others. The deviant would soon be dead, as Virago was already chasing him. The forest was burning now and even the heavy downpour which had just begun wouldn’t be able to douse it. The armies were on their way and Endridge’s greatest defense was dying. Gylbard felt untouchable right now.

“Now wizard, is there anyone that can stop me? Is there any way that I can lose?” said Gylbard turning to face Aelnoq, who was still praying to the Earth. His arms were outstretched, pointing out the destruction he was causing. Aelnoq looked up at him, with angry eyes, furious at what he’d done, but still responded, “Yes... there’s one.” Gylbard cocked his head to convey his confusion at what Aelnoq had said, “Oh? And who might that be?”

“You will be stopped, Gylbard, by the son of the Earth.” said Gylbard whose eyes glowed a light yellow now, a pure light. “He will stop you when you choose to trust him the most. You will bring out your own demise, and that of your whole nation.” The light from Aelnoq’s eyes slowly faded away. He had just delivered a spark of knowledge of the future that he had been granted to him. Gylbard knew the importance of this, and it was unnerving.

“The son of Earth? There were only three wizards born of the world, of which is the old man at Endridge, who is destined to die soon. Then there’s you and you’re no threat. Is the... does the third wizard live?”

Aelnoq nodded giving a slight grin. He could feel the fear and anger overcome Gylbard now. He thought himself unstoppable up until this point. There was a weakness now. Gylbard, for the first time in his life, felt vulnerable.

“Be careful Gylbard, those who try to evade destiny only arrive at it quicker. The truth has been revealed. There is nothing in your power that you can do to stop it now,” said Gylbard, trying his best to derail the chancellor’s progression of his plans. The crowd had stopped cheering and stared at Gylbard in silence. What was going to happen now?

## **CHAPTER 5: Malarkey’s Tavern**

Felix wiped the sweat off his brow as he stared at the field ahead of him. He sighed and looked up at the sky thinking of all the grueling work he had yet to do. The heat from the sun made mirages across the grounds making it look as if the ground itself were melting. And it was hard for a man like him. Felix was really tall and thin. He had no muscular composure and usually got tired very fast. It would take him the whole day just to finish all his field work.

He flicked the hair out of his face, which formed messy black locks over his head. Besides his height though, Felix was very plain looking. He was raised in a family of farmers his whole life. His father was a farmer, as was his father's father, and his father’s father’s father. His life was going to be just the same, and it would probably stay that way for many generations to come. As Felix felt the heat of the sun on his aching body, he sat down trying to take a moment for himself, when suddenly, he heard a loud screechy voice coming from behind him.

“FELIX! ARE YOU LYING ON THE GROUND?! GET UP BEFORE I MAKE YOU,” screamed the voice from Felix’s home. He turned around to look at his mother, who was standing

in the doorway, yelling out towards him. Felix's house was small, as was everyone else's in this part of the plains. It had two rooms, one where his mother slept and one for the kitchen. Felix himself slept outside under the stars, or usually the rain. It was barely being held up together and lining the left of the structure was a large pile of boards of wood. Felix was always covering and fixing the many holes in the place, but more kept on coming.

Felix looked upon his mother now. She was a more burly woman, who tended to eat more than she should. She was glowering at him, like she always tended to do.

"Yes Ma!" shouted Felix over to his mother in a screechy, high-pitched voice. "Not that you could walk all the way here if you tried," he mumbled under his breath.

Felix hated his mother for the kind of person she was. She never did any work herself, but made Felix do it instead. Plus, he had gotten his annoying voice from her. He definitely looked like his father, though. Felix's father was tall and stocky like him, with deep hazel eyes and curly black hair.

They had really had a great relationship, Felix and his father. Unfortunately, he had died when Felix was really young. Since then, his home has become his prison. The only time he ever went out was when he went to the market to sell and late nights when he would sneak off to the tavern.

"God help me," said Felix under his breath as he lurked back up and picked up his plow, getting back to work. As he made his way through the soil, Felix could see the rest of the plains. The whole land was dotted with small houses surrounded by large areas of land. A single strip of road passed through the whole plains leading from the lake that was in the center of the farmland, all the way to the village of Belveyon, which was far along the east coast.

Felix did not know a single other person on the plains, though, well except the old man that ran the tavern down at the beach. There were no children of his age in the area. Besides, Felix's mother didn't like conversing with the neighbors, which she said would slow down Felix's rate of working.

For Felix, it was a simple life that would probably mean constant sustenance, but he was tired of living as he did. Besides his problems with his mother, Felix also wanted to see the world. But to shy away from the face of destiny was a path so impossible to take, it hadn't even been carved. He was to live and die a farmer.

Felix spotted a small dot in the sky that seemed to be moving, but it looked nothing like a bird...

"I must be going crazy from the heat," claimed Felix, taking a sip from his canteen that lay on his hip. The sun's heat was often intense in the plains that made up the farmland, and mirages were something Felix was well acquainted with. He had seen many strange things, large trees, animals, or large huts in the distance. Although, this was different. Besides being in the air, the object didn't seem to be going away no matter how much Felix shook his head.

On the contrary, it seemed to be getting bigger. He looked back to see if anybody else was witnessing what he was. He saw his mother lying peacefully on the bed, fast asleep. There was not a single other soul outside.

"Geez, who would be? Why would anyone be as stupid as to work right in the middle of the day in this heat?"

Looking back up, though, Felix could tell this was no mirage. It was growing bigger and bigger at an alarming rate and getting closer to him! As he looked closely at the thing, it seemed to be a large flying creature unlike anything he had ever seen before.

Suddenly, Felix's eyes widened as he saw the creature coming right at him.

"Ooh noo!" yelled Felix running in the opposite direction from where the creature was coming in. "It's going to eat me! Please o dear god I'm sorry for anything bad I have ever done, though I can't really say what I have, but please don't let me die I'll do any - AHHHHH!!" yelled Felix as he dived to the ground just as the beast was on him. He heard it crash into the ground behind him. Soil was thrown in all directions, splattering Felix in soil. The whole ground shook from the impact and every sound in the world seemed to quiet. Felix's head was tucked under his arms as he quivered in fear. Although, the beast was not attacking him.

"Am.. Am I dead?" Felix asked himself, feeling his body to make sure everything was intact. Wiping the dirt off his face, he stole a peek at what it was that had crashed into his field. He saw the neck of a beast, a giant black scaled goliath that stared down at him.

"AHHH!" shouted Felix again, backing away on his hands and feet. Suddenly he heard a voice being emitted from the creature.

"You really stuck the landing well boy," said the beast with its head cocked to the side. Felix's eyes widened as he heard this.

"You... you can talk?" said Felix, still feeling just as scared as he had before, but slightly more intrigued.



“Oh excuse me if I’d never ridden a dragon before! I thought you were an expert in all things magic. Didn’t your father teach you how to land a dragon?” said the beast, but in a different voice now.

“Well n..no.. he didn’t. My father’s a farm-” responded Felix, right as he saw a pair of legs shoot out from above the creature and a boy jump to the ground. Following him was a man that looked quite dangerous, and a beautiful girl who made Felix’s heart skip a beat.

“Would the two of you stop bickering? I had to listen to your constant blabber the whole way. Curmo, that was an excellent landing for your first time,” said the girl to the first boy that had jumped off the dragon.

“Did this dolt think he was talking to the beast?” said the larger man pointing at Felix, who rubbed his neck sheepishly now. Felix got up slowly and backed away slightly from the dragon, who was staring directly at him.

“I.. Hel.. um.. Can I,” said Felix, attempting to talk to the party, but not knowing what to say. It’s not every day a dragon crashes into your field anyway.

“Can you not speak? Great we landed in the one field run by a deaf,” said the boy, who Felix presumed was Curmo. He looked annoyed around him.

“Curmo! I don’t know what’s gotten into you since we left. That’s no way to greet someone,” said the girl over to Curmo. “Hi there! My name is Bella. These are my friends: Curmo and Akuldra.”

Felix looked over at the party and gave a meek smile, still eyeing the dragon from his peripheral vision. “Oh, Don’t worry about Zenvor, she won’t hurt you,” said Curmo, in a slightly apologetic tone for the way he had just spoken.

“I.. My name is Felix,” said Felix, holding out a hand to the girl who shook it with a smile.

“Hullo! Pleased to make your acquaintance,” she said, looking around at Felix’s field.

“I... love your home, Felix.”

Akuldra stepped up to the boy. He looked menacing and his face was in a constant scowl. Frankly, Felix was afraid of this man who towered over him. “Is there a tavern near here? It has been quite a long journey.”

Felix nodded, slightly breaking out of his daze that had captured him. “Yes of course. I can take you there now. Would... Zenvor, like to eat anything?” Felix asked slightly awkwardly looking back at the creature that was about the size of a large stable horse. At the sound of her name, Zenvor whipped her tail on the ground, getting more dirt over the crops.

Curmo stepped up to Felix now, a slight smile on his face. “Sure she would! Would you happen to have meat on you?”

Felix looked perplexed between the three members. He couldn’t really afford to feed a dragon. No farmer in these plains could.

Bella saw the look on Felix’s face and quickly responded saying, “We saw the shore not too far from here didn’t we? Zenvor can fish there.”

“Ya ya, all that’s fine. How do we get the tavern boy?” asked Akuldra again, seeming very impatient, as his stomach began to rumble slightly. “Well it's right on the way to the shore as it is,” said Felix, pointing to his right. “It should be a short walk from where we are.”

Suddenly, a voice erupted from the house where Felix lived. “WHAT IN THE NAME OF.... FELIX WHO IS THAT!” shouted Felix’s mother. Felix looked awkwardly from his party

over to his mother. “They’re travelers Ma! I’m taking them over to Malarkey’s!” shouted Felix back to his mother.

“OH NO YOU’RE NOT! I WANT YOU TO CLEAN UP THIS MESS AND DON’T BOTHER COMING BACK HOME UNTIL YOU DO! AND ONLY MAKE SUPPER FOR ME TONIGHT, CAUSE YOU’RE NOT EATING. IS THAT A DRAGON!!!” shouted the mother excitedly seeing the giant creature for the first time.

Felix sighed, looking back over at all the work he had to do.

“Well, we best be going then,” said Curmo looking back at Zenvor, who seemed really tired. Akuldra seemed to agree as he started making his way over to the edge of the field “Hold on there for a moment,” said Bella, staring at Felix, feeling a little sorry. “Would you like to come with us Felix?”

Felix looked back at his mother, who was now making her way over to him after seeing the dragon. “I would like to, but I can’t,” he responded, looking back at his mother.

Bella now turned to Akuldra, “Felix could help us if we need any information at the tavern. He probably knows the people here.”

Akuldra nodded and looked over at Felix. “Lead the way boy,” he said.

“Now hold on just a moment! Who do you think you are!” said Felix’s mother who was now on the field with them. “You can’t crash into my field and take away the boy!”

She looked over at the dragon who seemed to be rolling around in the dirt pile she had just created. The dragon looked extremely menacing and Felix’s mother stood a good distance away.

Akuldra looked back at the damage, which wasn't as bad as he may have expected. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out two silver coins and tossed them over to her. Felix's mom stood speechless, staring at the pure currency, which would be way more than necessary to cover the costs of the damage the dragon had done. Giving a slight nod, he started to move back towards the shore, beckoning the others to follow him. Bella and Curmo did, while as Felix tried to, his mother grasped his hand.

"Oh you're not going anywhere you little twat! I'm going to beat you blue for ever disobeying me!" Felix's mother said as she started to drag Felix towards the house. He looked back and saw the party leaving for the tavern, maybe his only chance at a better life.

"Wait!" yelled Bella from behind them. "Felix, would you like to come with us?"

"I already told you! He's not going anywhere," said the mother looking towards Bella with disgust. Bella, ignoring what the mother had said, stared at Felix, waiting for a response. He looked back at his mother, and then again at Bella's face. He gave the smallest nod, which resulted in a thwack across the back of his head.

"I swear Felix, I'm going to give you so much work you'll work yourself to death!" threatened the mother, her voice rising higher than Felix had ever heard it go.

Bella looked back at Akuldra and Curmo who were raising their eyes at her. Did she seriously want another person along with them? Akuldra rolled his eyes and made his way back towards Felix.

"Hey wait there for just a minute, what do you think you're doing!" yelled Felix's mother who hid behind her son now, scared of the menacing man that was approaching them.

“Let go of the boy, woman,” said Akuldra, who now stood over her, staring down intensely. “Get away from me you red eyed demon! Yes, you didn’t think I’d know deviant! You’re a freak. Don’t go around telling me what to do. I won’t give you my son,” yelled Felix’s mother up at Akuldra, all while still hiding behind her son.

The air around them tensed up. Akuldra scoffed before pulling Felix aside with ease, pulling himself.

“Let me make one thing clear. I don’t want to have to bring another idiotic, straw-brained boy along, but I will, because I don’t like you. Talk to me like that again and you won’t live to see tomorrow,” said Akuldra, stepping in closer to the woman to make his point clear. He then snatched the money he had given her right from her hands. Felix’s mother was left speechless—as she had never been talked to like that. Felix smiled up at Akuldra. Seeing his cruel mother being put into her place was a very pleasing sight. Akuldra stepped back to the boy, patting him on the back and said, “Let’s go. I want some ale.”

As Felix was walking off, he saw his mother looking down at the ground. She looked quite lonely out in the middle of the field, and Felix did feel a pang of guilt for leaving her here like this. Although, this was quickly overcome with the excitement of adventure. Was this party really bringing Felix along to where they were going to go?

So now the four walked across the vast fields towards the Malarkey's tavern at the edge of town. Ahead, Akuldra walked with Curmo and the dragon. They seemed to be bickering about why Akuldra had called him straw brained. A few paces behind them, Felix and Bella walked in strides. There was a crowd gathered in the distance, staring at the strange party. They must have

been alerted by the sound of the dragon crashing. It was the first time they had ever seen one. No one got too close though. The stories of these beasts were legendary but also terrifying.

“So Felix,” said Bella. “Where are we exactly? It’s hard to see direction when flying atop a dragon.” Felix responded saying, “Oh, you seemed to have followed the north end of the shoreline to the Great Plains. We fall within the boundaries of Endridge.”

“Endridge! Oh that’s wonderful! We’re going there right now actually.” said Bella sounding relieved. She had thought the worst of their travels. Were they going in the wrong direction? But this comment from Felix was quite reassuring.

“Where do you travel from Lady Bella?” asked Felix, quite respectfully. This got a laugh out of Bella, who had never heard anyone call her that before.

“Just Bella’s fine. Well we left Belveyon. It has been about three days of travel since we left. Actually, our town has been overrun by monsters controlled by a wizard the northern kingdoms found. They are invading the western continent and we have to get to Endridge to inform them before it's too late.” Bella quickly spouted all the information of their travels with Felix.

Felix’s eyes widened as he heard this before he responded, “Oh my. Well that’s... horrible.” He looked upon Bella’s concerned face. “Don’t worry, you’ve traveled fast and traveled a great distance. Endridge is quite close and you should make it before nightfall on the dragon.”

“You’re sweet, Felix. I’m sure we’ll make great friends,” said Bella. Felix felt as if a thousand fireworks had gone off at once in his head. He felt elevated at hearing Bella say this.

“So I take it you’ve never been to Endridge before?” said Felix, trying to keep the conversation going.

“Oh never, but I’ve heard the tales of the kingdom of heavens. The buildings that peek above the clouds. Statues that are larger than the biggest trading ships. It sounds wonderful,” responded Bella.

“Well it is,” said Felix, lying to Bella. He’d never been to Endridge himself, even though he lived so close to it. Although, Felix wanted to impress this girl. “I’ve seen every inch of it. I even met the king and queen. They were quite... mannered,” said Felix. This got Bella to raise an eyebrow, suspicious of Felix’s words.

“Hey boy! Come up here!” yelled Akuldra from up ahead. Him and Curmo were standing still now, waiting for the other two to catch up. Ahead of them lay the vast ocean of the north. The horizon could be seen in the distance as low waves lapped the beach. On the coast was a large building, surrounded by people and you could hear the talking from up the hill. Malarkey’s tavern was one of the only spots for the farmers in these plains to meet up. It was a rowdy and fun bar. Whenever Felix went here himself, he always snuck around the back to meet with Malarkey himself, who’d offer him a plate of fries and a large glass of ale.

“That’s it right there,” said Felix pointing down at the tavern. Akuldra’s face lit up as he started to make his way down to the tavern. Bella and Felix followed him, while the dragon leapt in bounds behind them. Felix looked around one more time before following them.

Down at the tavern, everyone who was outside immediately got quiet as the group approached them. All eyes were on Zenvor whose head whipped from side to side as she was excited to be amidst so many people for the first time.

“Come on girl, let’s get you some food,” said Curmo as he made his way over to the shoreline with Zenvor following him. They had stopped at a couple of points already on the way. Since they were following the shoreline, Zenvor could easily get some food from the ocean without too much difficulty. Dragons were known to be excellent fishers. She ran towards the water on all fours at an immense speed and dived into the water, bobbing out with a cod in his mouth. She looked adorable jumping in and out of the water, nearly making one forget the kind of creature that it was.

As Curmo walked back over to the tavern and everyone went into the back entrance, a large crowd of people could be seen surrounding the water. Watching the creature as it gracefully dived into the water and shot straight out like a cannon, displacing thousands of gallons of water onto the on-lookers. The first thing Felix noticed as he entered the tavern was the music. There was a band playing a fun jig that could be heard all the way to the shoreline, but once inside the tavern did you really notice how uplifting it was. Felix immediately felt at home and relaxed after what had just happened.

Akuldra led ahead of the group, with Curmo in tail. Bella trailed behind them and Felix was all the way at the end. The whole place was crowded. Tables were filled with farmers, travellers, and merchants. They were shouting and laughing. The walls had stains from the alcohol that would probably never leave. The carpet that laced the floor was dirtied beyond recognition and you could almost not see the floor at all. On the walls hung large pictures drawn of the ocean, Endridge, and even Malarkey. Since they had entered from the back door, to which Felix had had the key, the corridor led straight to a back room that very few people knew about. It was behind the kitchen and hidden behind a shelf of canned items. As they entered the room,



the musty smell of a cigar was visible and the whole place was filled with a cloud of grey.

Curmo, Akuldra, and Bella began to cough loudly. Felix was more or less used to the feeling of entering the room at this point. The open door allowed some of the smoke to clear out and now a man could be seen sitting at a table directly at the center of the room.

He had a large burly moustache covering his face and a beard that was tied down. His hair was messy and fell in uneven clusters. He was surrounded by many bottles of beer, and more bottles were nearly situated in front of him.

“Close the door behind ya! Who’s standin’ over ther’ anyway?” said the man with a thick accent. “AH! Felix ma boy! How er ya,” said Malarkey standing up to greet Felix, who made his way in front of the group.

“Just great,” said Felix. “Nearly died a couple of times, but besides that.”

“Oh das goooood...” said Malarkey drunkenly, not entirely registering what Felix had said. His eyes now fell upon Akuldra and the rest.

“An’ who might these be?” Malarkey asked. “Ah. Malarkey, meet Curmo, Akuldra, and Bella,” said Felix pointing over to the others. “I just met them today. They’re traveling to Endridge.” Felix purposefully left out any information that Bella had told him on the way to the tavern. It’s not like Malarkey would have understood anything in his state anyway.

“Ah! Peeesed to meet ya,” said Malarkey holding out a hand to Akuldra, who simply stared at it. “Any friend of Felix isa friend of me own. Hey Runescrawl! Get these good people here some of me beer and a plate of some shark meat!”

Bella's eyes widened at the last phrase and Akuldra's face curled up into a slight smile. "Thank you for your services, Malarkey I'm assuming," said Akuldra over to Malarkey while picking out a seat of his own and picking up one of Malarkey's beers.

"Das right good sir," responded Malarkey, tossing Akuldra a bottle opener. "So where d'you travelers come from?" Curmo and Bella both took a seat at this point, and Curmo responded saying, "Belveyon sir. It's been about a three-day journey."

"Is that right now lad? Well y'seem to've made an awful good time," responded Malarkey, still a little dazed but paying attention enough to his guests. "Well, we were riding a dragon," chimed Bella, who still couldn't get the high of the first flight out of her system.

Malarkey's eyes widened for the first time. These words snapped him out of his drundely state and brought him back to reality. "You did what?" he asked again, putting a hand over his ears as if to make sure he hears it properly

"They rode in on a dragon. I saw it with my own eyes," exclaimed Felix from the corner of the room. "In fact they crashed into my field." Malarkey stood there for a few moments, not saying anything, before erupting in laughter. "Well it seems our guests here t'day are no ordinary people. No ya'll aren't humans are ya?" Asked Malarkey looking over at Akuldra, who hadn't batted an eye.

"Yes sir," chimed in Curmo before Malarkey could find out anything about Akuldra. "I just learned that I'm a Pertur." Malarkey started to laugh again, except this time much louder. "A Pertur ya say?" He asked Curmo, who nodded up at him. "Well I'll be. I guess that be explaining the green hair."

Felix looked towards the group, confused at the exchange of words. His mother had said Akuldra was a deviant back at his home. Was he not really? Was Curmo lying just now? Before he had time to think about it any further, their food arrived. A giant tray was brought into the room. The smell of the fish filled the entire room. You could damn near smell the sea breeze as if you were at the edge of the water. On top of the tray was the biggest fish Curmo had ever seen. It was, as Malarkey had promised, a shark. The dead body of this beast lay limp on the metal platter. It had a beautiful grey and white coat that stretched the entire length of its body. The creature had had its fins cut off and his whole body had been chopped up to make it easier to eat. The shark's lifeless eyes stared up at the ceiling, its mouth hanging slightly ajar, so that you could still see its teeth. The shark's teeth were a spectacle in and of themselves. Rows and rows of daggers were visible. This creature must've been a primal hunter in the waters. Maybe better than most other of its species. Now, it was just food.

Four men came into the room carrying the giant tray and set it right in the center of the table. Seeing the beast lying there was a different thing than talking about it. It almost felt as if the shark would come to life and bite off someone's neck. Felix excitedly stared at the others, who weren't used to the sight. Felix, sometimes when he had snuck to Malarkey's tavern, had tried to finish off just a small portion of the meat, which was an impossibility. No party less than fifteen men had ever been capable of finishing off a whole shark. Although, in that instant, Akuldra's face showed that he could do that and more. The instant the shark was brought into the room, Akuldra's face had lit up. Though he didn't seem like the person to allow himself to smile, it was apparent that he wanted to. Bella looked bewildered as she stared at the proportion of the meat.

Right after the entrance of the tray, another man dragged in a crate which held maybe a hundred bottles of ale. Akuldra looked as if he were about to cry from happiness. Curmo, although, also looked like he was about to cry. Felix stared confusedly as the boy's face, who instead of being grateful for the food he was being given, looked positively depressed at the sight of the shark.

“And there tis,” said Malarkey, with his hands out in a grand fashion, as if presenting the food to the others. He had always been very proud of his tavern and his extensive array of seafood. Without a moment's hesitation, Akuldra reached in and pulled out a giant meaty piece of the shark, before chomping right into it. The hot meat seared into his mouth, but Akuldra didn't care. Grease and blood alike slid down Akuldra's face as he went in for another ferocious bite. He was using two hands to practically inhale the food. When he was about halfway through the second bite, Akuldra opened a bottle of ale and gulped it down immediately. The others stared at him wide-eyed. Bella, who seemed to be the more polite of the three, calmly took a knife and cut up a small portion of the shark's underbelly before lightly placing it on her plate.

Malarkey started laughing in large guffaws as he saw Akuldra eating. “I don't know what it's about ya sir, but I think we coulda made great friends,” he said in between laughs. Akuldra looked up at him, beyond grateful for the food he had been given. “I don't doubt it for a moment, old man. What do I owe ya?” he asked, tossing a pouch of coins onto the table. Malarkey waved a hand as if shooing away the idea. “Not only are we hosting magical guests her tonigh', y'all are friends of maboy Felix here. No price for you good sir,” Malarkey said with a slight bow, which he seemed to find hilarious as he bent over laughing. Akuldra let out a slight chuckle too, to his own surprise.

His eyes then fell upon Curmo and his smile immediately went away. The boy was still staring at the creature, eyes now filled with water. No one else really seemed to have noticed. Akuldra was too busy eating and Felix and Bella were talking by themselves in the corner. “Ah, you’re a Pertur. Can’t bear to eat the Earth’s majestic creatures can ya?” Malarkey asked as he made his way over to Curmo.

“It doesn’t make sense though,” responded Curmo. “I eat meat all the time. The steaks of Belveyon are known worldwide and you best bet I’ve had my fair share.”

“It’s different here boy,” said Malarkey solemnly. “This ain’t no livestock. The shark is a graceful beast of the sea. To see such a creature die would be troubling to most, but especially to the kinds of us.” Curmo’s eyes widened as he looked up at Malarkey properly for the first time. In his eyes, there was a strong hint of a luscious green. “From my great grandfather,” said Malarkey as he pulled Curmo up to his feet.

“We’re gon take a walk outside for a bit. Y’all enjoy the feast,” said Malarkey over his shoulder as he pulled Curmo outside the room. Akuldra put his hands up as if trying to wave as he went right back to eating. Bella smiled up at Curmo as she went back to talking to Felix, who seemed to be trying very hard to maintain eye contact with her. From a counter Malarkey picked up a plate of fried potatoes and green beans and handed it to Curmo, who started to devour the food immediately, as he had been quite hungry too. As they went back outside, the music and jubilation of the tavern came back into focus as Malarkey led Curmo back out of the door they had entered from, careful to lock it behind him. They were immediately greeted with the sound of seagulls flying over the crashing waves. Small red crabs walked along the sandy beaches, digging small holes and burrowing back in them. At the far end of the shoreline, a large group of

people had gathered around to see something in the water. It was Zenvor who was lying lazily on the water now, full from all the food he'd eaten. Mothers were holding their children back who were watching in bewilderment. Groups of men tried to approach the creature, but turned back after only a few steps in. This made Curmo slightly annoyed. Zenvor was such a gentle creature, yet feared so greatly by these people. But it made sense for them to not trust what they couldn't understand.

“Well ain't she a beauty,” said Malarkey as they walked along the beach to the shoreline. “I ain't never seen a dragon before, but that ther looks like a fine specimen.” Curmo starred back up at Malarkey, still thinking about what he had just said.

“So you're a Pertur too?” he asked, more and more questions filling his head, but not knowing if he'd be able to ask them all.

“Yes boy. I've known my whole life. Ever since I was a kid, my father used to bring me down to the ocean to help 'im an his men fish an' hunt. It was never pretty. They'd bring the nets and drag up about a hundred floppin' bodies. It was even worse with the sharks and squids. I ain't never had the heart to kill em'. I just couldn't. He'd beat me till I was nearly dead every time I came home cryin', yellin' about how I was just like his grandfather and was barely a man. When he died, I was the owner of this place. I had to keep the money flowin' in or else we'd die. I let the fishers fish an' I let the cooks cook. Even to this day, boy, I could never eat one of em'. That's really why I drown myself in alcohol each night. It's to numb that pain that I feel.”

Curmo nodded slightly, staring off into the distance, trying to absorb everything that Malarkey had just told him. He felt a little better now, knowing that what he was feeling was normal. The waves now slowly lapped at his feet. His shoes were wet and felt slightly cold.

Though there was loud talking from all around them, Curmo fell quiet in this moment, almost at peace.

“Boy it took me ages to learn my abilities, but it all comes from the love of the earth, at least for the likes of us. I can teach you to channel that power through yer body and use it to do things like this,” Malarkey said, staring far off into the horizon. He closed his eyes and reached a hand out into the distance. Far into the sea, a group of dolphins started leaping in and out of the water, creating beautiful arcs right before they dived back into the sea.

“Woah!” said Curmo, shocked at the man’s powers. “Will I be able to do things like that as well?” he asked inquisitively. “It takes years of practice boy, but I can teach you to start. The deviant over there had powers of his own. He can continue your training from there.”

Curmo was shocked again at how much this man seemed to know. “You knew this whole time,” Curmo asked with a slight laugh. “It’s the eyes boy. It’s the eyes that give it away. Besides, with the way that he eats. The man’s consumin’ the food of twenty grown folk,” responded Malarkey as he brought Curmo slightly away from the water, to start teaching him how to control his powers.

“You obviously seem to’ve a good start to understandin’ dis. You already controlled that beast ova there didn’t ya?” said Malarkey pointing over at Zenvor. “But that beast cared for ya. It’s a bit more difficult with things that don’t know you. For these things, you must first harness the power of the earth. Do as I do.” Malarkey brought one hand down to the ground, with his palms flat against the sand on the beach. Curmo got down to his knees and followed suit. “Now try to feel the energy o’ life course through ya. Allow yerself to become one with this sand.”

Curmo felt nothing. There was no flow of energy through the sand on his palms and the noisiness of the crowds yelling near Zenvor was a distraction. Everytime he tried to feel the sand and focus, he was immediately snapped out of it.

“Sir, I don’t think it’s working,” Curmo said over to Malarkey. Malarkey sighed as he opened his eyes.

“You must have patience boy. The first time I felt even the slightest sliver of the Earth’s flow, I’d been sitting right here for hours. Close yer eyes and focus. Listen to the steady flow of the waves.”

Curmo shook his head as he closed his eyes again, this time, slightly digging both his hands deeper into the ground. The noise of the crowds were still apparent. It was a nuisance to try and focus on the energy, but Curmo kept at it this time. He tried to think about the sound of the crashing waves. How the sound perpetrated a sense of serenity through his bones. Very slowly, he started to feel it. It was the feeling he got when he was trying to sleep, but snapped himself awake. The feeling of drifting off into another world, except he was aware. Infact, he was aware of everything. He could feel a heartbeat under his hands. One that was low, but still apparent. Curmo’s breaths slowly matched those of the crashing waves. He started to fall deeper and deeper into the trance. He started thinking about his own home, Bella and Muralen. He thought about Zenvor and how that first flight had felt for him. With every breath, he started to fall deeper and deeper into this state of aware sleepiness. His eyes darted from underneath his eyelids, since he was not able to see. But because of this, he could feel every inch of his own being. Slowly, Curmo could feel a slow flow of something sliding through his veins. It felt like silk and moved like water. The only way Curmo could describe it was as if the light from the



warm touch of the sun was coursing through your veins. It went slowly from his arms through the rest of his body. Curmo felt as if his whole being were being controlled by this force, but at the same time, he was able to control it. His mind was simultaneously calm and excited. Under his hands, the feeling of the heartbeat was more powerful now. At that moment, Curmo realised the heartbeat was beating at the same rate of his own. No, rather, he was following it. It suddenly clicked in his brain. This is what Akuldra must have meant when he said the Earth was alive. Curmo felt as if he were feeling a living creature, a being of pure energy and life. It had the power to create and build, but also that to destroy and break. The Earth could give him the energy he needed, but with his death, he would be returning it back. Suddenly, this thought of death snapped Curmo back to the through of the knight that the Cobali had brought to the market that day. How his head has been bashed in and how his lifeless body had laid limp before Muralen had buried him. Then, he remembered the burning of the forest that he had seen from the northern end of the continent by Folsele. He could almost hear the cries of the forest animals as they were making their way to flee. It made Curmo shake with anger. His blood began to boil as the power flowing through his body began to shoot back out, with greater strength and power. All he could see was a blanket of red.

In an instant, his eyes opened wide. Malarkey was holding his body trying to shake him awake, although it was difficult to see his face since it was much darker now. His face was scrunched up in fear and confusion. Dark storm clouds were circling overhead now, and you could hear thunder in the fat distance. Curmo felt exhausted, as if he'd just been running for ten hours straight. His head felt a little disoriented as he sat down to catch his breath.

“What happened to me?” Curmo asked, everything around him slowly coming back into view. “You did it boy. You did it an’ so much more,” said Malarkey, staring at Curmo, confused and concerned at the same time.

“I... I felt the energy pulsing through me, and then I just felt a burst of power being released and it was all over in less than a minute,” said Curmo looking around. “Wait, why is it so dark all of a sudden?”

“You’re no average Pertur boy,” said Malarkey. “When you went in the trance, it may have been working, but then I think you lost yer control. These dark clouds started rollin’ in and the ground began to shake.” It was at this point that Curmo noticed the chaos that was going on around him. People were running away from the tavern quickly and others were rushing home. Akuldra, Felix, and Bella also shot out of the tavern.

“They’re over here!” yelled Akuldra as he made his way over to Curmo. “What the hell happened here?” he asked, now talking to Malarkey.

“Twas some kind of tremor. Don’t worry though, these plains are prone to Earthquakes from time to time” said Malarkey jauntily, not letting the others in on what really happened.

Bella reached out a Curmo as she helped him up. He was drenched in sweat now, equally scared and tired. Every bone in his body hurt with every little movement he made. “Are you okay?” she asked him. Curmo nodded as he turned his attention back to Malarkey.

“Thank you for your hospitality sir, but we should get leaving soon. It is still a long way to Endridge and we need to leave fast,” Curmo said, wanting to suddenly get out of that place. When he had used his powers, it felt as if he had put a beacon on himself. As if he were calling

in everyone to his location. He suddenly felt vulnerable, like he was being watched, but looking around, saw nothing.

“Felix, thank you so much for making our company,” said Bella over to Felix, who was staring painfully at her. In this time they had spent together, he had really gotten to like Bella, and the thought of her leaving hurt.

“Well you could stay longer if you wanted to,” said Felix hopefully. “I mean I’m sure Malarkey could find a place for you to stay. Or my place... or anywhere really.” He was desperate to have this party stay. In Felix’s mundane life, they had been the only spark of interest. He didn’t want it to slip through his fingers.

“Like the boy said,” said Akuldra over to Felix. “We have to leave for Endridge. I’d appreciate it if you could point us the way good sir,” Akuldra now asked Malarkey.

Felix now came up to Curmo, who was quiet and slightly shivering. “It was really nice to meet you. I wish you happy trails on your way to Endridge. I also wish you the best on your quest,” said Felix. Curmo managed a slight smile as he even reached out a hand to shake with Felix, which was noticeably clammy.

As the three travelers started to make their way towards Zenvor, another sudden tremor hit the ground. This one though, was a lot stronger. The thunderous sound of the breaking Earth could be heard and they all tried all they could to keep their balance. Curmo shot a look back at Malarkey. Was this still him doing this?

Malarkey shrugged and responded, “I wasn’t lyin’ when I said there were actual quakes here boy.” Although, this really didn’t seem like a normal earthquake. The ground at the far end of the beach started peaking higher and higher, before the dirt above it erupted leaving a giant

hole in the ground. Zenvor made her way out of the water and started walking towards Curmo, not taking her eyes off this unexplained hole for a minute.

Akuldra unsheathed a sword and Malarkey stepped up next to him, pushing Felix behind himself. There was a moment of complete silence. The beach had been cleared since Curmo's training and the few people that were left ran away in terror.

In an instant, a creature burst out of the hole and about thirty feet into the sky before landing back on the ground. Although it was difficult to see from afar, the being was hideous. It had two large talons for feet that dug into the ground. Its thin yellow legs lead to the creature's feathery body. It had two large wings on either side. All the feathers were a black color that was occasionally dirtied with the red of the creature's blood. Its body was slimy, as if it had just been born. A long neck stretched over to its face, which held a mouth with two giant fangs that came down about halfway to its neck. The creature's mouth was open all the way to form a sort of circle and it spat out dirt and mud next to it. It had two eye sockets, neither of them with eyes though. As it opened its mouth, the beast let out a ferocious screech into the air. It was on a hunt. On the back of the monster was a saddle, though, and there was someone riding the creature. It was a tall woman with straight black hair and her body was completely laced in armour. On her face was a grin and she wiped out the dirt from her hair, looking around to spot the party.

"What the hell is that?" said Akuldra and Malarkey in unison. Suddenly the creature let out another beastly scream as it whipped its head in the direction of the group and started running towards them at full speed.

“RUN. NOW!” yelled Malarkey as he pulled out a dagger that was strapped to his ankle. The woman that had been riding the bird-like thing gracefully jumped off of it and landed a blow with Akuldra’s sword, and the fight began.

“Alright you feathery beast. Show me what you got,” said Malarkey as the thing started to approach him. He put down his weapon and closed his eyes, putting forward his hand as if to calm down the beast. It didn’t slow down though, and as it screeched, it kept on running... and nearly hit Malarkey, as he moved out of the way just in time. He stared at the thing. Confused at what had happened. Usually creatures were not as difficult to calm down.

“That won’t work!” yelled Curmo from behind the edge of the shop, where the three kids were huddled. “It’s being controlled or something!” Malarkey looked at the thing, wiping the sweat off of his forehead. This was going to be more difficult than the thought.

Not too far from him, Akuldra and this mystery woman were locked in a sword fight. Each blow was countered or parried and they were both trying their best to get the edge on the other. The whole time, the woman was smiling, impressed at Akuldra’s skills.

“So you’re a warrior too,” asked the woman as she backed away for a second, trying to get a better look at Akuldra. “I’m impressed. At this point you should already be dead.”

“I apologize to you maiden, but I’m afraid I have a habit of staying alive and I don’t intend to break it now.” The woman arched an eyebrow as she bit her lower lip. “The name’s Virago.”

“Akuldra. So why are you doing this?” he asked.

Virago, completely ignoring the question, said to Akuldra, “I like you. Too bad I have to kill you,” as she swung towards him again, which Akuldra barely managed to block in time.

“Let’s dance,” Akuldra responded to this with a smile.

Malarkey barely managed to dodge the creature’s hit again, as he dived to the ground next to him. “Alright then boy! What do you suggest we do!”

“Damn it let me think for a second,” exclaimed Curmo back, after being asked this for the third time already.

“We have to go help him,” said Felix, trying to make his way over to Malarkey who had gotten back up and was facing the animal again. Bella quickly put an arm out in front of him and said, “Oh ya? How do you reckon we do that without killing ourselves?”

“What if we both try to calm it together!” yelled Curmo over to Malarkey, who was panting now, staring at the bird after it had missed for the fourth time. “You can barely control yer powers boy! It’ll get both of us killed!” said Malarkey back to him.

“Trust me sir! I think we can do it!” said Curmo, putting one leg in front of him as he inched his way to the edge of the tavern wall near the battle. The sand around them was flying all around now as a slow drizzle began to fall upon the beach. The waves started to intensify as they began to realize that a storm was coming.

The creature sprinted towards Malarkey at full speed again, this time clocking his right shoulder as Malarkey tried to dive. He yelled out in pain as he held a hand over the bruised area. Curmo dashed towards Malarkey, making it to him just as the creature turned around. It made a little screeching voice as it jumped up and down, proud of finally connecting a blow with Malarkey.

“Curmo, be careful!” yelled Bella as she herself started inching closer towards the battle. She’d never seen Curmo fight and now he was facing a menacing monster head on.

“Remember what I taught you boy,” said Malarkey to Curmo, both of their attention completely on the thing, which wasn’t more than forty feet away from them. “Clear your head of all thoughts and focus on the flow of energy. The beast has a mind of its own. You can’t control it but you don’t have to. Even when you made the dragon fly. All you do is suggest it to the animal. Now focus.”

The monster started revving up again, kicking the dirt from under its talons, letting out a series of little yips. Taking a deep breath, Curmo closed his eyes, and put all his thought into the animal. The aching pain that he had just felt started fading away slowly as he let himself take in the energy of the Earth again. The animal started running towards them at full speed. Malarkey also slowed his breathing, putting all his energy into stopping the creature. It was now or never. They were too close to dodge anymore. If they didn’t manage to stop the thing, they would probably get badly hurt. Felix watched everything and it felt as if time had slowed. The thing was nearly on them. Both Curmo and Malarkey had their hands outstretched. Felix closed his eyes unable to watch, before he heard a giant bang from the direction of the fight. He looked back at what had happened.

The creature was flying backwards through the air now, at a faster speed than it had been running. Curmo was standing up with his hands outstretched towards it, Malarkey with one knee on the ground. The creature hit the ground about a hundred feet from where it had been struck and lay there on the ground, unconscious.

Curmo looked down at his hands, wondering what had happened. Malarkey stared back up at him, shocked at what he had seen. In this instant, Virago was also slightly distracted as she

stared at Curmo and how he had hit the beast. Akuldra took advantage of the situation and hit the backend of his blade towards Virago's head, knocking her out.

Everyone regrouped in the center of this battlefield. Felix checked on Malarkey as Bella helped up Curmo. Akuldra walked towards them slowly.

"Well isn't this nice. Let's sit and have a nice talk as well. When this she-beast and her animal wake up we can invite them too!" said Akuldra sarcastically as he sheathed his blade.

"There is a carriage back in that shack over there. It's tied to an equex and it can take you to Endridge. Felix knows how to ride it too. I'll take the dragon back in the other direction. These people obviously know you're riding it and they'll probably follow me. I'll get them away from you. Hurry now. I think this woman is coming back around."

"Wait I'm not leaving Zenvor! She can't make it without me," said Curmo staring back at his beautiful pet. "Trust me boy," said Malarkey. "I'll take good care of her." Curmo looked up at Malarkey, into his eyes. He trusted him, even though he hated to admit it and wanted to stay with Zenvor, he knew he trusted Malarkey. Curmo nodded, petting Zenvor one last time before following Felix over to the shack. They all quickly jumped into the carriage as Felix took the reins of the equex and started off in the direction of Endridge. The equex was a fast creature, and they were immediately speeding past the shoreline at an immense speed. Looking back, Curmo saw Malarkey take off on Zenvor. He also noticed the woman that had attacked them wake up her ride and dig back into the ground, following in Malarkey's direction.

Although, everything for him was really a blur. He had just lost his best friend. As the tire from his battle got to him, Curmo quickly drifted off into sleep, a single tear dropping down his face.



## **CHAPTER 6: Welcome to Endrige**

Curmo awoke to a light rocking from side to side. His first thought was that he was on a ship. All preceding events from the previous day were a blur to him as he slowly got up. His headache as if it were being pounded by a hammer. Opening his eyes, he wondered why his eyes weren't adjusting, before realizing it was dark out. With a few deep heavy breaths, Curmo began to recollect everything that had happened. They had been in a battle. Malarkey had ridden off with Zenvor, He'd used some weird power. Curmo felt a slight pang of pain thinking back to this. His dragon was gone. Curmo had spent over a year raising and training her. Zenvor was his best friend. Now he would probably never see her again.

Looking around, Curmo noticed he was in the back of a carriage. It looked like a small room with a low tarp covering the overhead. The sides were lined up with carpet from end to end which was embroidered with a flowery pattern and was a deep red. On the back end of the carriage was a simple looking couch. There was a single small door next to it, from which he had entered. The room was small, bit high. Curmo could stand up all the way without his head touching the tarp, but barely. Looking up now, he noticed that the tarp was caving downwards, and formed the shape of a body. Someone was lying up there.

Right then, he noticed Bella lying down next to him, fast asleep. He looked at her, the way her brown hair fell over her face to cover up her eyes. She looked so peaceful. There was an opening at the front end of the carriage, which led out to a small ledge. Sitting on it was the outline of a tall and thin boy. That's right, though Curmo, Felix was riding the carriage. So that

meant the person lying atop the tarp was Akuldra. Curmo made his way across the room, careful to avoid Bella, but flicking Akuldra on the way, which resulted in his uncomfortable shifting.

Curmo smiled as he stepped out onto the ledge and into the open night sky. The fresh wind from the fast ride blew into his face. They were on a path through a patch of woods now. Trees and bushes flew by them on the side. The ride was much faster than Curmo would have expected a horse to go, but looking down, he noticed that it wasn't a horse pulling the carriage at all. The creature looked like a horse, though, but it was an equex.

It had four legs that beat against the ground with immense power and agility, pushing a cloud of dust behind them. It was silent though, not making a sound as it galloped through the trees. Its whole body was a slight blue and was moist, as if it had just taken a bath. The creature had no hair on its body, and you could see its visible bulging muscles, each working in perfect harmony to move the beast forward. It was a much longer creature, almost as if it had been stretched out. On its head, covering its mouth, was a series of tentacles that dangled loosely, flying out from being the creature as it moved across the ground. On its body were markings, scribbles and symbols. It was a sacred beast, one of a divine power and Curmo looked upon it with respect.

Curmo looked over at Felix, who hadn't noticed him come out yet. He was looking around at the trees, barely nodding off into sleep. Curmo went over and placed a hand on Felix's shoulder, whispering, "Morning pal." To this, Felix immediately jumped up, nearly falling off of his post, Curmo grabbing him just in time as they both sat down on the ledge laughing.

"You're quite jumpy aren't you." Curmo was still laughing from Felix's reaction. He looked around sheepishly. "Sorry, I was expecting you to be asleep. We're nearly on the open

road to Endridge now. You can maybe see it over the treetops here.” Felix pointed to his left, right over a clump of trees, to show Endridge in the distance. Curmo could see the peak of the castle in the distance. The tower itself looked wider than Curmo’s whole house. He blinked twice, taking in the majestic beauty that he was about to visit.

“I’ve only been to Endridge a couple times, when my father took me,” said Felix, petting the equex’s back. “It really is as amazing as you would think. Easy to get lost though.”

Curmo nodded, trying to shake off his aching head, which hurt less now. “We have to get some important information to the king actually,” said Curmo as he looked back, trying to see if he could spot the Great Plains or even the mountain range of Belveyon, but they were too far away now. Curmo worried for his home, and what the northern continent was capable of, but he knew he couldn’t have done anything if he stayed. Getting the help of the Endridge army was the only way to save his home, and maybe even the rest of the world.

“Yes, actually Bella told me about that on the way to the tavern,” responded Felix, to which Curmo snapped back. He had gotten lost in thought. “The northern continent is attacking. Well I’m glad I got out of the farm when I did. It’d be much safer at Endridge anyway,” said Felix. He wasn’t even supposed to be here with them. But, he couldn’t be happier that he was. Endridge would be the safest place for them to be. Their army had more men than some whole kingdoms.

“I don’t know much more than that. Apparently they’ve taken over Folsele already. If the wizard truly is completely under their control then we’re in a lot of trouble.” Curmo lightly scratched his hand, over the spot where he had been hurt by the dentron, remembering how scary

it had been when he was top of him, baring teeth as big as knives. Curmo shuddered, coming back to reality.

“So are you?” Felix asked. Curmo looked back at him, confused as to what they were talking about. “Oh I just asked, are you worried about your parents? It must be frightening, with them being so close to the Folsele borders and all.”

“My parents are not in Belveyon. Actually I don’t know where they are. Probably in Eslov, but that’s not what the townsfolk say. Anyway I’ve lived by myself for a lot of years,” explained Curmo. Felix nodded, looking away awkwardly. “I - I’ve also been on my own for most of my life. My father died when I was young. And my mother... well you already know.”

“Ya I think your mother might be an ogress in disguise,” said Curmo with a smile as Felix laughed.

“Ya she’s not the easiest person to live with. Although I can’t really complain. I’ve had Malarkey with me for a while. Ever since the first time I snuck off to his tavern for the first time a couple years ago, he’s been like a father to me. I try to go off to the tavern whenever I can, but it’s really difficult. Speaking of which, when Malarkey was fighting off the monster back on the beach, why did he have his hand outstretched like that?”

He looked back at Felix and took a deep breath, “Well, Malarkey was like me. We’re both creatures known as Perturs. We have the magic of the Earth and nature. I don’t know much more than that, only what this old man told me,” Curmo said, pointing to the still body of Akuldra lying atop the carriage.

“Wow.” Felix was quiet, absorbing the information that Curmo had told him. “That is so amazing!” he blurted with glee thinking about how all this time, he had been hanging out with a magical being. Curmo smiled at Felix, glad from his reaction.

“So, Akuldra, is he really a deviant?” Looking back, Felix could see the large silhouette of Akuldra’s body lying on the tarp. “Ya, and from Folsele too.” Felix’s eyes widened. Even down in the farms everyone knew about the dangers of Folsele and its monsters. They would sometimes find a way to get out and wreak havoc across the western continent. For the deviant to be from Folsele was a big deal.

“Ya, but I don’t much like him,” Curmo said, looking up towards Akuldra with annoyance. “He’s always treating me like I’m a kid. Seems to want to point out every mistake I make. I wish he’d just leave me alone for once.” Curmo recalled the times on their travels to the Great Plains. At every stop they made, Akuldra wanted to criticize Curmo’s flying and fishing skills. He never said anything to Bella, though. It always got on his nerves.

Felix laughed, saying, “It’s just his way of trying to prepare you. Like you said, you’re a Pertur. He’s probably tough on you to make you strong enough to use your powers.” Curmo shrugged, staring up at Akuldra, not buying a word of it. “I don’t even know where my powers come from. When we were trying to tame the beast back on the beach, I sent it flying backwards. The way Malarkey looked at me... it was as if I had some power that he himself did not. There’s something different about me. I can feel it. Akuldra would never tell me though,” said Curmo. His body still slightly pained now from exhaustion, but he was feeling much better after stepping outside with Felix.

“I saw that too. Malarkey’s never done anything like that before, though.” said Felix with an air of confusion and amazement.

“You were there? I thought you’d fled behind the tavern when the beast was there,” joked Curmo as he lightly patted Felix on the back, who smiled while shaking his head.

“So did you know your parents have any powers themselves?” questioned Felix. “Well, my mother had the same hair and eyes that I do. I think it’s possible to say she must have been a Pertur as well. My father was just an ordinary man though. His appearance resembled that of any other trader I’ve ever seen. But I never knew anything about magic from them.”

Felix nodded while thinking back to the bird-like beast. It had come out of the ground. He didn’t even know if that were possible. Then he thought back to the person that was riding the beast.

“Do you remember the woman that was there?” they both said sync. “Well I barely do,” said Curmo, to which Felix nodded. “She seemed like some kind of knight. Seemed well trained at it too. I think she went toe to toe with Akuldra, so I am forever trying to meet her again. I think she tracked me because of the energy pulses.”

Felix whipped his head towards Curmo. “Wait, that was you?” he exclaimed in amazement, immediately looking back to make sure that he hadn’t woken anyone else up. Curmo nodded, not making direct eye contact with Felix. He looked upon Curmo more clearly now. The boy’s green hair and eyes stood out to him more than ever before. Such power that he could make the Earth itself tremble resided in his meager body. Felix knew Curmo was strong, but this seemed stranger than ever before.

Sighing Curmo looked over at the equex. “The creature rides really fast doesn’t it. It’s as if we were being carried by ten of the speediest horses in the world.” Felix smiled looking down at the equex himself. “His name is Hippo,” said Felix. “He came from the sea one day, and Malarkey has kept him ever since. He’s the fastest horse I have ever ridden. Nearly matches the speed of your dragon,” said Felix, feeling slightly foolish for saying those last words. Even in his sleep, Curmo had been whispering Zenvor’s name. He really missed her. Curmo nodded looking back at the sleeping pair.

“How long have we been riding for? It doesn’t seem like you got much rest,” said Curmo. “Oh it’s been about nine hours. But honestly you three needed it more than I do. Your journey up until now has seemed to be quite tolling. I’m happy to be able to ride with you. Bella took a while to sleep, though. She was sitting next to you for a few hours just to make sure you were okay.” Curmo smiled looking back at his friend.

The sun was starting to rise now. It was peeking up from behind the carriage. The trees began whooshing past them less and less frequently as they made it out of the woods and into the clearing so that Endridge could be seen clearly. Curmo froze, staring at the spectacle in the distance. Though it seemed quite far, the size of the kingdom was enormous as it loomed over the surrounding areas. Curmo could see the tower that he had seen before, but there were more of them. The castle in the far end of the kingdom seemed to have about ten towers jutting out from the top, each reaching up to different heights. Even the shortest tower was about ten times the height of a tree. There seemed to be a giant moat surrounding Endridge. This moat led to a giant waterfall on the right side. It roared louder than a lion. Looking to the right, you could see the lake that the water flowed into. The constantly flowing water had steady ripples and waves, and

from time to time, the fins of some creature breached the surface. There was probably some giant serpent living in the depths of the lake. It was at this point that Curmo noticed the oddity of the place. There were large houses and structures that seemed to be floating around and above the kingdom. Bridges connected them as if like vines in a tree. The whole place looked like a jungle of stone. From around the silhouette of the kingdom, a slight white aura was visible, but just barely. Endridge was a place of magic. Curmo's eyes widened as the sunlight began to hit the kingdom and he could see it more clearly. It looked like a place from his wildest imagination.

Felix was looking at Curmo, seeing his reaction for the first time visiting Endridge. Felix had been the same way when he had first arrived. Although the magic of Endridge never failed to amaze even the most regular of travelers. "Woah," said a voice from behind them. Turning around, Curmo could see that both Bella and Akuldra had awoken. They were staring as wide eyed as Curmo was.

"That's probably it," said Akuldra, coming down from his perch to the side of the carriage. He placed a foot against the outer edge of the carriage and leaned out while holding onto the rope keeping the tarp up to get a better look. Bella stepped out from the carriage, her jaw hanging open. None of them had ever seen this place before. All the stories they had heard were true. Endridge was amazing.

"Those floating structures... how's that even possible," said Akuldra, without taking his eyes off the kingdom.

"The wizard's magic. It's what keeps the entirety of Endridge functioning. He makes the water flow and the buildings float. The wizard is the soul and heart of Endridge." explained Felix, who had actually once gotten the pleasure to see the wizard, only from a distance though.



Bella now looked at Curmo, who was looking a lot better than before. She walked up to him without smiling... and slapped him right across the face.

This was enough to snap Akuldra out of his daze and Felix looked away awkwardly. Curmo was shocked for a moment as he turned back to Bella's furious face. "Um... nice to see you too," he exclaimed. "Curmo you idiot, you could have died! Who told you to go right into that battle with that bird thing? What if it killed you? You barely survived. And since you've never used your powers... I mean how would you even know if it was going to work!? I thought you were going to die for sure! You are the single most stupid kid I have ever met!" gushed Bella, her cheeks getting red hot. Curmo looked at her with wide eyes. In fact, the entire party got silent. They hadn't ever seen Bella get this frustrated. Then, as quickly as the anger had flooded her, it was gone. She embraced Curmo and whispered, "I'm glad you're okay." She stepped back, wiping the slight hint of tears in her eyes. "We should stop up there for just a moment," said Bella, pointing to a small creek in the meadows where they were.

Without question, Felix pulled the reins slightly on the equex and it slowed down, knowing exactly where to go as it approached the flowing water. Curmo, Akuldra, and Bella got off the carriage and made their way over to the creek stretching from the long trip. "I haven't traveled this long since... well yesterday," said Akuldra as he stretched near the water. Curmo got down and filled up all the canteens before greedily gulping down his own water in the matter of seconds and filling it up again.

Felix was still sitting on the carriage, awkwardly waiting with Hippo, waiting for them all to return. Even though he had traveled this distance with the three of them, Felix still felt as an outsider. He didn't know them as they had gotten to know each other. Breaking his train of

thought, a voice below said, “Felix get down here!” It was Curmo, who had noticed the boy sitting off by himself. He smiled, getting off the carriage, barely landing properly, as he tumbled to the ground. This got a laugh out of Bella.

“Still more coordinated than this boy here,” said Akuldra, smiling, as he pointed over to Curmo, who grumbled and went back to filling up the water.

“Oh ya, is that why you barely managed to survive a fight with that girl back there?” Curmo rebuked, reminding Akuldra of the fight with Virago.

“Never underestimate your opponent boy. Yes I was barely managing, she was a strong foe,” said Akuldra. Curmo didn’t expect Akuldra to admit to his close battle, which made him that much more frustrated at the deviant.

“Did you see that emblem on her chest though?” chimed in Bella, also thinking back to the fight. “It looked like the Viserwen seal. My father has a lot of old swords lying around the house, he’s a blacksmith, and some from the ancient northern kingdoms. This seal was one of them, I’d recognize it.”

“That means they already know we’re going to Endridge. We need to move fast if we’re going to make it there in time,” said Curmo as he filled up his canteen for the last time.

“And boy, you should feed your equex. These creatures of the sea need constant feeding and water to survive. That’s why we’ve been going so slow,” said Akuldra to Felix as he opened his satchel and tossed it over to him. It had rolls, carrots, and packaged meat, no doubt from Malarkey’s tavern.

“Wait, we’ve been going slow?” exclaimed Curmo thinking back to the immense speed of the equex.

“Aye boy, these sea runners are used to running under water. Compared to that, running up here on land is far easier. This beast will sprint much faster now,” said Akuldra.

“How do you know so much about equex’s anyway?” questioned Bella. She had never seen one and was pretty sure Akuldra wouldn’t have either.

“I was trained my whole life to be a soldier against monsters and strange creatures. I know every possible beast we could ever come upon,” responded Akuldra with pride, thinking back to his father and how he had trained him day and night relentlessly.

Felix went up to Hippo and offered him the food from the bag, which he chowed down happily. The beast would grab the food with his tentacles and feed himself the vegetables and rolls. Hippo began to glow a light green now, just barely noticeable. Curmo brought it to one of the canteens and gave it some water, which Hippo immediately lapped up. His skin felt slimy against Curmo’s, almost as if they were underwater right then and there. The equex neighed happily, as if saying they were ready to go.

As they all climbed back on the carriage, Hippo shot out in front of them, moving much faster than he was before. Curmo was pushed back towards the back of the carriage as Bella hung on the sides of the wall. Even Felix was slightly pushed back, not expecting his friend to be going much faster than before. The only one who stood their ground was Akuldra, who barely budged when the ride started. In fact, he was standing up on the ledge right next to Felix. He smiled and closed his eyes, letting the wind blow through his flowing blonde hair. “Now that’s more like it,” he said. “Now we’ll be at Endridge in no time.” Hippo neighed in agreement as he galloped faster and faster towards this strange enchanted kingdom.

All around them, horses and carriages could be seen going to Endridge. Some people were carrying donkeys with goods hanging off their sides. Others were bringing together their livestock. And even fewer people weren't merchants at all. Some simply rode on horseback going into the kingdom. All eyes were on Felix and his carriage as they shot past people, barely missing some of them. "Sorry!" shouted Bella and Felix over to the sides as people who dodged their transportation just in time. Although it was true what Akuldra had said, they were making incredible distance now and would probably be in Endridge in a few minutes.

As they looked ahead, they could clearly see the source of the water now. A giant river flowed in from the west right for Endridge. Right before it hit Endridge, the moat parted the wild rapids to travel around the kingdom and off the waterfall on the other side. The kingdom stood on a ledge high above the ground meadow. If they had traveled directly from Belveyon without going north, they would have needed to travel the entire length of the meadows below to get on the upper ledge of Endridge. The only other way would have been to climb the waterfall, but that was impossible.

At the front of Endridge, probably on four sides, stood tall, with many guards surrounding each of them. With every person that approached the kingdom, the guards talked to them and let them into the kingdom one at a time.

"Welcome to Enridge," said Felix as they approached the northern gate, with only a few people ahead of them. He held out his hands in a grand fashion as if presenting the kingdom to them. Felix was proud to be involved in something the others knew nothing about. Slightly pulling on the reins, he brought the equine to a slow stop right in front of the bridge. The roaring of the waterfall was a lot louder than they had heard it before. The bridge itself was extremely

wide, so that about five carriages could cross it together. When you were standing on it, the water from the rapids would spray onto you. The glorious waterfall could be seen directly to the party's left. The drop was about three hundred feet in height. Beyond it, you could clearly see the mountains of the eastern coast and the great plains behind them. While Endridge was taller than anything else in its surroundings, The windy roads to reach it along with the masses of woods around it made it hard to see from too far. This made the kingdom feel that much more impressive as they got near it.

Felix got off the equex and made his way over to the guards as he was called to the front of the line. "Hullo good sir!" said Felix as he now stood in front of them. The three guards at the gate were all dumbfounded when they saw the equex in front of them. It was a terrifying creature to those that would have been seeing it for the first time.

Finally turning to the boy, the guards nervously said, "What - what business do you have here boy?" The other two didn't take their eyes off of Hippo for a second, who seemed to be looking around curiously, for it had been around these many people for the first time.

"Ah well we're here with important information and would like to see the k-" Curmo started to say before Felix lightly elbowed him. "We're here for trading purposes sir. You see, this noble steed here is the fastest in the land. We wish to sell it finally. I'm sure you saw us approaching from afar and for this creature to carry the weight of this carriage should be proof enough." Bella smiled looking confidently towards the guards. Akuldra raised his eyebrows and avoided eye contact with the guards.

They looked upon the rag tag party. They were a strange bunch, but it was undeniable that this horse was something special. They had seen it pulling the carriage towards Endridge at a

speed unimaginable. Slowly, the guard who had been talking to them gave them a slight nod and said, “The price of entry for merchants is 10 pieces. ”

Akuldra nodded, giving the money he had in his pouch to the guards, who looked at the money in shock before quickly assuring them into the kingdom. Akuldra looked confused, staring back at them. “They meant 10 bronze pieces, you idiot!” said Curmo, not wasting a moment to correct Akuldra’s mistakes. In response to this, he got a slap on the back of his head as Akuldra said, “watch you mouth boy,” switching his gaze from the fuming boy to look at the bustling town of Endridge.

They stood in the middle of a giant cobblestone pathway that led into Endridge. Lining the sides of the road were giant buildings with clothes hanging on the porches on clotheslines. The air was chaotic, but in a good way. The whole kingdom reminded Curmo of the Belveyon market. People were talking to each other on the streets and from across buildings. The streets were filled with kids running hither and thither. Movable carts were being carried across the streets to all the buildings. Large bridges stretched from the grounds going up to floating structures lined up at different heights all over the place. This sight took Curmo’s breath away. It was remarkable to see magic of this magnitude in play. Around them, and surrounding Endridge was a giant circular fence. It stretched as high as a regular cottage, on the ground. Protection didn’t seem to be of a great concern to Endridge. Not that it would matter, since they were under the protection of the wizard. There were also trees growing in random patches where there were no buildings, as if the structures had sprouted in the place of a field. The bridges stretched between the floating structures and the large tenements like vines.

As they moved along the stone path. They also noticed strange characters hanging around the kingdom. Some creatures included Aeloridians, the noble bird-people. There were also creatures with twelve arms crawling across the place. Some small dwarves pushed past them and moved along to the town square. Fairies flew across the air in front of them, leaving behind a trail of dust in their wake. All in all, no one seemed to notice the party as an oddity. Everyone and everything seemed different. Even though an equex had come into the kingdom, it was not of importance, although people would probably begin to if they took a closer look at Akuldra. Even for the kingdom of Endridge, deviants were not at all welcome.

The giant road in front of them led to the castle at the direct center of the kingdom. It towered over even the floating buildings. There was one giant central tower, and about twenty more surrounding the borders of the castle. Only a single road went to the castle, and this was through another bridge. A stream of the water cut straight through the kingdom, and split off into another moat surrounding the castle. It seemed almost isolated from the rest of Edridge. The structure was on a slight elevation so that the back end of the castle seemed higher than the front. Giant stone arches looped between towers and stone walls surrounding the building. Though they couldn't be seen from afar, intricate carvings willed the walls of the castle. They told the story of Endridge's history... and its wars. Unlike the gawking group, no one else really seemed to give much attention to the castle .

"Everything I'd ever heard was true," said Curmo in amazement. "I hadn't really heard much, but I still agree with you," responded Bella, who was also struck by the beauty of her surroundings. Akuldra was the only one that seemed a little uneasy, as if he didn't want to be here. "We better start moving soon," he said, slightly urgent. "I don't think I want to be around

these many people right now.” His eyes were darting from left to right, making sure not to make eye contact with anyone.

Felix jumped off of the ledge in front of the carriage now, and moved towards a small closed barn near them. He pulled out a key and opened the padlock to the place. As he opened the doors, a cloud of dust gusted out and dissipated into the air. The inside of the small barn was dark, with just a small window on the far left side that was mostly covered by the building next to it. For the most part, the structure seemed to be intact, except for the backend of the barn where two pieces of the floorboard were missing to reveal a small path under the barn probably leading outside. It was probably wide enough for Felix to just crawl through. They all made their way into the barn.

“Felix what is this place,” Bella asked, brushing aside cobwebs threatening to hit her in her face. “Oh, my father always puts his donkeys in this barn whenever he comes to the Endridge market. I thought we could use this place. All the locks in the great plains are the same actually, so the one I had for the carriage could open up this one here. It’s a good system as long as no one else from home tries to come here,” explained Felix as he detached the carriage from off of the equex and made his way to the back of the barn where the floorboards had been taken out. “I don’t know about that though.”

Littered across the floor were marbles and pouches of money. “It seems as if this place’s been gettin’ more visitors than you may have expected boy,” commented Akuldra, also noticing all the things Felix had. “It doesn’t matter now though. We have to get inside the castle now. The king’ll want to hear about the mission. So if you’ll excuse me,” said Akuldra, making his way out of the small building.



“Wait, you can’t just go up to the castle like that!” Felix warned Akuldra who turned around. “I don’t know if you know much about castles but they don’t just let anyone in. Only those permitted by the king may enter.”

“Well then what’re we supposed to do?” said Akuldra, getting more and more impatient by the second.

“Well if we apply for an audience, we could get to see the court in a few months. The line to visit royalty is high,” explained Felix.

Akuldra shook his head. “Well that’s not going to work. Guess we’ll have to sneak in.”

Felix raised his eyebrow, looking shocked at the mere remark of the statement. “You can’t just.. It’s a cattle... umm... that’s a very impossible thing.” Akuldra stepped outside, looking at the castle again. It did seem heavily fortified. At least five guards stood on every bridge leading to the castle.

“Well we’ve got no other choice,” said Bella from behind them. “I mean, if the northern continent is going to attack, we have to tell the Endridge king. Otherwise we’re all doomed.” She was right, obviously. Applying for an audience would take too long and who knows what would have happened by then. They would need to get into the castle fast. Sneaking in would be the only way.

Just as they were thinking this, a voice came from behind them. “Alright then, if you don’t want to get sliced up, I suggest you put your hands in the air.” Turning around, they saw where this voice had come from. At the entrance of the barn stood a group of five people. They were older, probably in their low twenties, although the girl that had just talked to them was much younger, maybe around fifteen in age. Her short blonde hair was dirty and didn’t seem

combed. She had deep hazel eyes, like Bella, and her brow was furrowed up in anger. All their clothes looked quite comfortable and expensive, but judging by their faces, these people were poor. Their faces were covered in soot and they carried a dirty look in their eyes. All of them had their hands outstretched and were holding knives directly at Akuldra and the rest of the group. One of the boys in the back closed the barn doors solely.

“I don’t know what you’re doing in my hideout, or how you got here, but you chose the wrong place to rob.” said the girl as she stepped forward.

Felix had his hands up directly in the air as he backed up behind Curmo, who shot him a dirty look. “You said this place was yours,” said Curmo.

“It is! I have no idea who these people are!” exclaimed Felix. Akuldra rolled his eyes as he took a step towards the girl. The other four behind her stepped up immediately, two boys and two girls.

“Hey, I don’t know what you think you’re doing but here’s how this is going to work. We’re going to rob you penniless and then take your carriage. You can take your creepy looking horse and get the hell out of here. If you listen to us we might let you live too,” said the taller looking man.

Akuldra let out a laugh as he shot a look back at the others. “At least he’s got guts,” he said, pointing directly to Curmo. The man looking confused stared back at Akuldra, noticing his red eyes.

“What the hell are you?” he asked, feeling intimidated by Akuldra’s confidence as his hands began to shake slightly.

“Get it together Mites,” said the young girl, giving him a sideways glance. “They’re just another bunch of tourists who seem to have gotten lost.” She smiled slightly at Felix, looking from his feet up to his head. “The tall boy is mine,” she said, much to Felix’s dismay who let out a slight whimper. “Now!” she shouted as they all jumped up and got behind the group, holding a knife to each of their necks.

The girl got behind Felix, the taller guy, Mites, got away from Akuldra and got behind Curmo. One of the older girls was pointing a knife at Bella and the last two were on Akuldra. “Don’t you move a muscle now handsome,” said the girl behind Felix as she smiled looking at him.

He looked as if he were about to cry as he managed to say, “o..k.”

Curmo looked around frustrated and said, “Alright let’s just calm down for a minute. Put down your weapons and let’s talk it out.” Bella was looking around herself, trying to figure out what was happening. Akuldra just looked bored as he leaned back on the carriage.

“Oh I know what happened. You all thought you could get into Treva’s hideout and make it out with my stuff. How did you get inside anyway?”

Akuldra stood up now, seemingly annoyed at what was happening. “Alright then, this was fun but we do have some work so... I apologize for this.” With this, he punched the guy in front of him and swept the other girl with his feet. As she fell to the ground, Akuldra snatched her knife and held it against her neck. He looked up at the girl now, who seemed concerned.

“I swear, make one wrong move and your friend here gets it.” Treva tightened her grip on the knife.

Felix said in a meager voice, “Akuldra... be careful.” He looked over at Felix, smiled slightly, and shrugged his shoulders. Immediately he stood up and started making his way over to the girl.

Felix’s eyes widened. “No, I think she was being serio-.” Within a moment, he wrangled the knife out of the girl’s hands and pushed Felix back behind him. “You were about to get me killed!” cried out Felix, checking himself to make sure he wasn’t hurt.

“Relax boy, nothing was going to happen to you,” Akuldra said, looking around at the others who were nervously glancing between each other. “Are we done here then?” said Akuldra. The girl was shooting daggers with her eyes. How was this man so calm? Most people just gave her whatever money they had but these guys were different.

Upon seeing their leader in peril, the others slowly dropped their knives to the ground and backed away, with their hands in the air. “Alright we’ll leave you alone. Let her go,” said the girl next to Mites. Akuldra pushed Treva towards the others.

“Felix are you okay?” asked Bella as she rushed over to him on the ground. “Ya I’m fine too,” said Curmo sarcastically, brushing himself off. Felix nodded as he stood up shakily. Upon seeing Treva behind him, he backed away slowly, not wanting to be taken hostage again.

Although Treva looked up towards them confused now. “Wait, your name is Felix? Are you the son of Fideli?” Felix nodded excitedly “Wait, how do you know my father?” he asked.

Treva smiled now. “Of course I know your father. He allowed us to stay in his barn in the first place. You see, we all live on the streets. They call us the Perico kids. We’ve always been trying to find a home in Endridge, but wherever we go, people just kick us out onto the streets penniless. When your father came to Endridge, we tried to rob him too. Unlike the others,

though, he didn't just give us money, he took out the floorboards back there and told us we could stay here whenever we needed to. And so we did. For the whole time your father was here, all he could talk about was you, Felix. He always said we'd probably make great friends if we ever met."

She walked up to Felix, confidently now, and held out her hand, to which Felix initially flinched, but then shook. "Well I'm glad that's cleared up now," said Curmo.

"Why are you here anyway? And who are these people?" questioned Treva, looking around at the party now. "These are my friends-," tried Felix.

"Companions," cut in Akuldra, quite rudely, to which Bella shot him a look.

"These are my *companions*, Akuldra, Bella, and Curmo. We're traveling to meet the king." This quickly got the attention of the other Pericos. "Wait, you're going to meet the king? How do you expect to do that?" cut in Mites.

"Well, we were thinking about sneaking in," said Bella now, stepping up towards the others. "But we had no idea where to go from there. Maybe you all could help us. I'm sure your adventures would have led to sneaking into places all the time."

The Endridgeans began to laugh now at the absurd comment they had just heard. Sneaking into the castle? Well that was just about the dumbest thing anyone could attempt. "I'm sorry I don't think you know how things work here. If you try to sneak into the castle, you'll get thrown into prison before you breach the front gates. There are guards at every post and on the bridges. The only other way would be through the water, which would probably sweep you off the falls anyway. "

“Oh, so you’re saying you can’t do it?” said Bella, to which the others stopped laughing immediately. “I mean if you helped us get in there, you could probably come out with enough to never have to steal again. But if you’re telling me that you’re not good enough then that’s okay too.” Treva cocked her head to the side, not relieving what she had just heard.

“Don’t listen to her,” said Mites. “She’s just trying to trick you. Besides, you know it would be too dangerous.”

This got Bella to raise her eyebrows as she quickly said. “Told you, even your own siblings don’t think you can do it.”

Treva whipped her head to face Mites now. “What do you mean it’s too dangerous? I could do it if I wanted too!” he raised his hands up in defense and shook his head. That was a mistake. “Besides, she’s right. We would have enough money if we steal from the castle. I think we should do it,” Treva exclaimed, turning to her siblings now, who looked at her dumbfounded.

“You were just talking about how it was too dangerous!” one of her sisters said. Treva thought back to their recent conversation. Rethinking what she had just said out of excitement.

Quickly, before Treva had time to change her mind, Bella turned to Felix. “I think if you ask her to, she’d agree,” she whispered.

“Me?” said Felix back, shaking his head, but before he could make his decision, Bella pushed him ahead, almost making him crash into Treva.

“Well... I think... it would be swell if you’d help-,”

“Then it’s decided! I’m helping you get into the castle.” Treva exclaimed excitedly. Felix looked shocked, glad that it had actually worked.

Her siblings looked at her confused. “Umm... you can, but we’re not going anywhere near that castle. Besides, remember what happened,” her other brother tried saying before Treva’s glare shut him up. “Fine then, raise your hands if you’re not coming,” said Treva. All of her siblings, except for Mites, raised their hands before slowly filing out of the room. “I wish you luck tho sis. Don’t die,” said her brother jokingly as he hopped out onto the busy streets.

Curmo looked towards them, wanting to ask what had happened last time, but didn’t want to discourage the two. Besides, they were the only ones who had in depth knowledge about Endridge and the castle. He needed their help. As much of it as he could get. They all grouped up in the center of the room now, a group of six strangers who had mostly nothing to do with each other, about to sneak into a castle.

“Before we plan anything, I really need to ask, why the hell are you risking your lives to get into that castle? What could be so important?” asked Treva.

“Well,” started Bella. “There’s been an invasion. The northern continent is at Folsele. Akuldra here made it out in time and we have to get these important battle plans to the king to get Endridge ready for battle.”

“Ok sounds good. So then the castle has three-,” Treva started explaining.

“Wait, you believe us? And you aren’t even shocked?” asked Curmo.

Treva smiled over at them. “Of course I don’t believe you. No one’s ever been to Folsele and made it out alive. But if you don’t want to tell me then that’s your business. Let’s just get through this and we’ll go our separate ways.”

Akuldra shrugged. They’d tried, but it honestly didn’t matter much anyway if Treva believed them or not. Just that she was willing to help them.

“So the castle has three main bridges, the closest one to us is the northern bridge. It’s a completely wide expanse so it’s not going to be difficult for the guards to see us. The first step is going to be getting through those gates.” They were all silent now, thinking about the wide bridge they had just seen. There wasn’t a house, tree, or any sort of obstruction in sight for them to hide behind. If they were going to get in, sneaking through the bridge wouldn’t be an option.

“Well what about the water route then?” asked Curmo, remembering what Treva had said earlier. “Didn’t I already talk about that? The water’s too fast. It would sweep us away within a second. Although you’re right. The guards would definitely not notice us in the water. No one would be dumb enough to go in it. If we do go in the water, there should be a gate towards the bottom of the moat leading to an underground pathway.”

Curmo looked over at her confused. “How would you know that?” he asked.

Treva looked scared now, thinking back to the first time she had tried to sneak into the castle. She was young and stupid then. The only difference now was that she as a little older... and maybe slightly more stupid.

“I... I tried to get in before and made it to the gate. I could see a tunnel on the other side. But like I said, there was a gate at the bottom. I couldn’t get it to budge and almost drowned.” Mites put a hand on Treva’s shoulder, remembering the events as vividly as she had described it.

“So going from the water won’t work, unless you have something to literally bend the metal.” Curmo, Bella, and Felix all immediately looked up at Akuldra who nodded, knowing what needed to be done. Stepping forward, he said, “You can leave that to me. I’ll go in first.”

Treva scrunched up her brows in confusion. “You? You won’t be able to do much unless you can bend metal.” Annoyedly, Akuldra looked around the room when his eyes fell on a



wrench. Grabbing it, he crushed the ends of it quite easily forming a misshapen ball of metal with just one hand. He didn't expel much energy and seemed to have done it with ease, as if he were crumbling a piece of paper

This shocked everyone in the room. Curmo had seen Akuldra's strength in battle, but never the full extent of his physical strength. This man was a lot stronger than they had ever imagined.

"How did you do that?" Treva made her way to examine the ball. As she tried to unravel it, it became apparent that this was no trick.

"What the hell are you?" asked Mites again, staring back at Akuldra's deep red eyes.

"Oh, Akuldra's a deviant," said Felix from behind them.

With these words, the ball dropped right out of Treva's hand onto the floor. The man's red eyes glowed now as he stared down. Akuldra immediately shot Felix a dirty look before turning his attention back to Treva. "I need you to trust me. These two have made it apparent that deviants aren't particularly liked. But I'm not going to hurt you. I just want what's best for us."

Treva gave a slight nod. Mites gulped back his fear as he kept one eye on Akuldra. Neither of them had actually seen a deviant in person. He looked so.. Normal. There was no oddity about his appearance, except for his eyes.

"I guess then you'll go in first, and open the gate for the rest of us to enter. The only problem is, the current is quite strong. Once you've pried open the bars, there'll be no way for you to confirm it with us. We will have to go in periodically. We'll give Akuldra some time before going in. I'll go first and then the rest of you can follow. If this doesn't work, like I said, there'll be no way to know. So it is quite risky. I'm not entirely sure I want to do this myself."

Treva looked uncomfortable at her feet. She remembered the feeling of being trapped there under the water, not being able to push against the current or get inside. If Mites hadn't jumped in after her... no that was too close .

"Don't worry about that. Last time you didn't have me," said Akuldra as if reading Treva's mind. She looked up at him and nodded. Through his demonstration, Akuldra had proven quite valuable. Besides, she was living on the streets. This was something she needed to do.

"So once we're inside, we can split up into two parties, we'll go meet the king and you guys can do... well whatever it is you're planning to do," said Curmo.

It was getting quite bright outside, the sun was completely in the sky now. "I don't know why, but I've got a strange feeling about this. Like something big is going to happen when we go." said Curmo.

"You stay here, boy. Bella, you stay with him. We don't need all of us to get inside. Me n' Felix'll meet the king. The less people we bring the better." Though Curmo wanted to argue, he knew what Akuldra was saying was right. They couldn't afford to risk everyone's life by going inside.

"Umm... me? I mean I don't think I'd even choose myself to go!" gushed Felix after hearing his name be called. "You're thin boy, skinnier than Bella over there. It'll be easy to get you inside," responded Akuldra, looking outside. They all stood quietly now, thinking about the plan they were going to undergo. It would have to be at night if they were going to get this to work. So they had the whole day ahead of them to wait.

“Alright so now what?” said Curmo. “Well,” Mites. “You are in Endridge. It’d be a shame if you left without seeing all of it.” Curmo shrugged as he jumped up off his chair and followed Mites outside, as did Bella.

“I’ll give Felix here a tour myself,” said Treva as she dragged him out of the room, much to his dismay. Before he had time to argue, they had shot out behind an alleyway. Curmo laughed and gave a slight wave to the flailing boy.

“Akuldra you coming?” asked Bella.

He shook his head and responded, “Gotta rest up before tonight. Besides, I’m not going out there with so many people.”

He jumped back into the carriage, too tired to think. In fact he’d been up the whole night atop the carriage, making sure they weren’t being followed. He needed all the rest he could get, especially for tonight. These were his last thoughts as Akuldra slowly drifted off to sleep.

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On the other side of town, Treva was dragging Felix through crowds of people as they made their way over the grand fountain of Endridge. It stood directly in the middle of the town market. Felix had never seen more people in one place before. In the Great Plains, one man owned acres and acres of farmland. Here, though, there seemed to be more people than land itself. Felix was constantly running into people and having other bump into him. Treva, on the other hand, expertly weaved between people, as if she had been doing it for her whole life which she probably had.

When they got to the fountain, Treva found a small patch of clearing near a bench where they now sat, being able to see glimpses of the fountain from in between people. The structure

was beautiful. It was made of pure marble throughout and was around the size of a large room. The circular fountain shot water directly up in a grand manor and the water would fall down into the lower pool below.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” asked Bella, looking over at Felix. His face seemed to relax a little after seeing it. “Ya, it really is. My father used to talk about the Endridge market all the time. It really is as beautiful as he had described.”

“Your father is a good man Felix. He took a chance on me when no one else would. I owe him my life. All my siblings do. We’d have probably gotten kicked out if we hadn’t found a home.” Treva got slightly teary eyed, thinking back to that day.

The market itself was amazing. There were large stores placed along the alleyways and short bridges stood between them. Small paths lead to another large square of stores and people. It was an endless place of discovery.

“Hey I wanted to ask you a question,” said Felix. “Why were you all so nervous when you found out Akuldra was a de-?”

Treva’s eyes widened as she immediately put her hand over Felix’s mouth. “You can’t go around saying that! Do you even know what a de-, well what Akuldra is, means?” Felix shook his head. He had never heard of a deviant, but Akuldra didn’t seem like a scary or dangerous person to him. He seemed more like a friend. In fact, he was shocked that his mother would have known what a deviant was.

“They’re creatures of pure strength. Their souls are bonded with Egants, the giants that roam the continents. As the legends entail, deviants were once the generals of the armies. Their strength and power allowed them to lead large rallies of men into battle. After the continental

war, though, deviants were looked at as dangerous. They were cast aside by society. Large pirates had gone off, trying to hunt the creatures and finish off their species. No one has yet succeeded.”

Felix gulped back, realizing who he had been traveling with this whole time. “Wow,” he managed to say. Now he realized his mother’s fear the first time she met Akuldra. He did know what an Egant was. And that kind of power in a human’s body was dangerous. “But Akuldra isn’t like that,” said Felix. “I’ve seen the way he acts. He seems to care.” Treva nodded too, having felt this from him before too, back at the barn.

“Where are your parents,” asked Felix now. “I mean you said you were homeless with your siblings. Do your parents stay with you?”

“I never knew my parents. None of us did. Besides we’re not actually brothers and sisters. We’re just a band of people that got together. I was abandoned on the streets when I was borned. These four kids on the streets took me in and took care of me until I was ten. Then I started taking care of them. I was a natural born thief. I was able to score the biggest scores at once. Enough to last us for a week sometimes. But like I said, we had to move around a lot to make sure we weren’t caught. I couldn’t risk my whole life being thrown away like that. Your father was the nicest thing that ever happened to me.”

Felix smiled, feeling proud of his father. He had always taught Felix the power of compassion and he was now realizing how great of an impact it had on others. “What about you friends, oh sorry companions, back there? What’s their story?” asked Treva.

“Oh Curmo and Bella are from Beveyon. Akuldra is from Folsele, apparently. They rode into my home, in the great plains, on a dragon. Curmo is apparently a Pertur so he was able to ride it here.”

“A what?” asked Treva. “Honestly I was assuming you would know,” said Felix as they shared a laugh. “And what about that Bella, is she also not human?” asked Treva. “Well I don’t know about that, but she is something special,” said Felix in a dreamy voice, to which Treva elbowed in the gut and responded, “She’s alright. Kind of loud-mouthed.” her face dropped in a slight scowl. Felix grew silent realizing she was annoyed.

Just at that moment, Mites, Bella, and Curmo shot out from through the crowd making their way over to the pair on the bench. “We have to go, now!” said Mites to Treva and Felix who looked confused. Standing up, they looked back and saw exactly what Mites was talking about. Oh boy, their lives just got a lot harder.

## **CHAPTER 7: Hunter’s Eyes**

A wolf lay in the clearing just up ahead. The sun was high now, and the beast was clearly visible as it bathed in the warmth of the sunlight. The birds were chirping cheerily around it, not aware of its presence, which was hard to miss. The creature was the size of a giant bull. This was no ordinary animal, it was a creature known to the northern region of the western continent. They were gorgeous creatures that few humans ever got the opportunity to see. Near her, there was also a hunter, with a spear carved out of a tree branch. The hunter’s eyes were narrow as her arm arched over behind her head. This was it, she was about to throw. It had been an hour since she had been sitting there, waiting for herself to go through with it.

The hunter's armour was set on the forest floor beneath her and she was perched on a high tree, just out of sight of the creature. Long silky black hair covered part of her face. As she moved the hair off her eyes, Virago could clearly see the beast. Should she kill it? She needed food. And this would last her for a long time. Her stomach rumbled in pain as she finally reeled back her arm all the way.

Her focus was on the neck of the beast. The creature was large and majestic, but she hadn't found anything else so far, and if she didn't do it she would die. With a final deep breath, Virago launched the spear through the air. It made its way with precision and speed before, thunk, burying itself right in the wolf's neck. It yelped for an instant before another spear came hurtling towards it, hitting it square on its body. And, with one final spear to the head, the creature collapsed to the floor dead. The world itself seemed to quiet as the happy chirping of the birds faded.

There weren't many people in the world that could kill a giant wolf. Virago, though, knew exactly where to hit the creature and make sure every vital function in its system stopped at her decision. She'd killed larger monsters in her life, but this was different. She knew the creature was just a monster, but still felt pain at its suffering. Although, this was quickly overcome by the hunger as she made her way to the ground and over to the beast.

In this moment, a large bird-like creature also came out into the clearing, knowing it was safe to. They had the whole place to themselves now. It was a strange creature, but one of great speed and strength. Virago had ridden it all the way from Folsele to wherever the hell in the world she was right now. The western continent was a lot larger than the northern continent, and this meant there were a lot of random woods all over the place. The amount of greenery here was

shocking. In the northern continent, almost every place was populated. No matter where you went, there were stores and shops. Here, there was no choice but to hunt to survive. For all long as she'd ridden, there hadn't been a single merchant in sight.

She sighed as she made her way over to the wolf. The bird came up to her and she petted it on its neck, scratching in the exact spot where the bird loved so much. Virago was careful to avoid touching the being's teeth. Two large tusks like fangs sprouted from the beast's mouth. It used this to dig into the ground. If you by mistake even grazed them, you'd be dead within the second.

Virago looked upon the giant wolf now. Though it lay on the ground, it was still intimidating, to most. The creature was as tall as Virago when on all fours and even longer in length. It was as if she'd killed a furry elephant. And boy was the wolf furry. It seemed to make up half of its mass. The being had a beautiful grey coat all over its body except its stomach, which was white. She, with the help of her flightless friend, moved the wolf to the edge of the clearing, where they had made camp that day.

As Virago started a flame and began cooking the meat, a delicious smell wafted through the air. Other animals would be on her soon. She had to eat and get out as fast as she could, but that was no issue. The creature with her could tunnel into the ground in the matter of seconds. Of course it wasn't the easiest means of travel, but it sure was the safest.

And so there they were, a huntress, enjoying her kill as blood from the animal dripped down her mouth, and the saber-toothed bird, who ripped into the wolf's body, splattering itself and a smiling Virago with more blood. As she ate her fill, Virago stood up and studied her surroundings, to make sure there wasn't anything near her. The sound of howling wolves could



be heard in the distance. Definitely the regular kind. They would tear up this creature faster than Virago had.

“Alright buddy, it’s time to go.” Virago petted her friend as she climbed up on its back. Towards the edge of the woods, she noticed the wolves quickly approaching her. With a smile, she waved saying, “Buh-bye,” as she whipped the reins, sending the bird jumping in the air, and diving straight for the ground. Instead of making contact, though, it began ferociously clawing at the ground, moving through the dirt as if it were water.

Virago closed her eyes. The initial impact was always the worst part for her. She hated the sense of not being in control. If the creature decided to stop in the middle right then and there, she would definitely die. The world around her went from bright light to complete darkness within seconds. Dirt began to surround them as Virago smelled the fresh scent of the Earth. It had rained recently as well, making the digging that much easier. Virago held her breath as the creature wiggled through the soil. She buried her face in the beings neck, sticking close to its body and keeping her feet straight behind her.

Riding a Ferox was one of the hardest things to do. When you were underground, it was easy to lose grip on the creature and fall behind it. But, Virago had done this many times already and was confident in her ability to maintain control over the beast. Not for a moment did her hands unravel as they scurried along.

Within sometime, the creature burst up through the soil again, this time on the other side of the forest. The clearing was far behind them and they had escaped the wolves. Virago breathed in the fresh air as the sunlight temporarily blinded her. Looking back , she saw the clumped pile of dirt and the tunnel they had dug. It was truly a spectacle.

Looking forward, she saw the beach up ahead again to the right. They had been traveling along the coastline, trying to cut into the mainland when the time was right. Virago was out here on a mission. Her job was to kill the deviant of Folsele. The stupid wizard had let him go and now it was up to her. He had traveled towards the eastern coast, but was probably going to go to Endridge to deliver the Vierwen battle plans to the king.

Virago was ordered to get near Endridge and cut off the main path. If they were going to Endridge, she would catch them before they got there. Although, it was more difficult than Virago had thought. She was used to having servants and getting whatever she wanted. Out here in the wild, though, it was kill or be killed. She was always looking over her shoulder to make sure there wasn't anything about to pounce on her. Birago was used to tough conditions back in Viserwen too though. She was the admiral of a small fleet worth basically a whole army.

They had ridden into battle and won many wars for the chancellor. Even when the Verwen rebellion was growing large, Virago had been there to slay the rebels and keep their citizens in line. She was vital to the functioning of the kingdom, though Gylbard would never admit it.

She smiled thinking about her friend. Her and Gylbard had grown up together. She was the daughter of a worker at Gylbard's palace. They had played together as kids and Virago had grown to have affection for him. Even when Gylbard's father died and he cried himself to sleep at night. Virago was there to comfort him and make sure he was okay. She couldn't imagine living life without him. Then, as they both grew older, he had commanded her to a fleet and given her training from the best generals to ensure she was strong in war and battle. The happiest

day of her life was when Gylbard gave her a personal fleet and permission to fight in the civil war of Viserwen.

Her whole life had been centered around battle and war, and she was greatly excited to be in this one. Virago knew of the first continental war. Gylbard's father had led it and died like a fool trying. Gylbard was different though. He was a natural born leader. If anyone could finally win this war it was him. This is why she couldn't fail him now. If the deviant made his way to Endridge, it would spell the end of their plans. And Gylbard would probably hate her then.

Veriago noticed a small structure ahead on the beach, probably a tavern, and started galloping her steed towards it. The scenery around her was beautiful. To her right was the sea and across it, she could slightly make out the lands of Treeslov. It was an impressive kingdom, but not nearly as magnificent as Viserwen. The waves slowly lapped at the sandy shore. To her left was a small incline and rows and rows of farmland. In the narrow strip between, there was nothing and no one, except Virago. She closed her eyes, taking in the sound of the waves and the smell of the salty air, as she finally approached the structure.

As Virago had predicted, it was most certainly a tavern. A loose wooden sign hung with an image of a mug of ale. Another sign hung above, and though most of it had faded out, she could barely make out the words: Malarkey's Tavern. Malarkey, what a strange name.

All around her was the sound of people laughing and cheering. Once they noticed Virago and her beast, though, they grew silent and backed away, watching from a distance. Virago smiled as she tied up her friend to a post. Inside, she could hear a band playing a jig and the sound of even more laughter. This would be fun.

Grabbing a pouch of coins, she made her way into the tavern, pushing past two heavy wooden doors. The inside was a lot different than what she had expected. Rather than the rowdy throwing of mugs and chaotic fights, there were tables set up in an orderly fashion. Men were sitting at tables drinking ale and eating plates of fried veggies, large fish, cooked potatoes, you name it. Now that she was inside, everything seemed quite boring. There was no stir of excitement and adventure here. This was a tavern for farmers.

All Virago needed was a good reason to start a fight. That would make this a whole lot more interesting. As she was thinking this, a man walked right up to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Why aren’t you a gorgeous girl. Would you like to come sit with me,” he said pointing back to a table with a drunken smile. She smiled back at him. Perfect. Without a moment’s hesitation, Virago grabbed his wrist and pushed his arm behind his back, twisting it to make it hurt even more.

“Ahh!” cried out the man as all the attention turned to them. The laughing and cheering all stopped as the heads of the men turned to the fight. A slow circle began to form around them. “What’re ya doin there lass?” said one of the men. “Let him go now and no one’ll bother ya.”

“Oh ya,” responded Virago, pushing the man aside, “and where’s the fun in that!” With these words she kicked the drunk into the edge of the circle, as he bumped into more people. Immediately as she did this, Virago’s attention turned to the others in the room. There were about seven men around her, of which two had stepped back. One other hadn’t but it looked like he was about to. The others seemed to be the man’s friends. They had gotten up from the same table. Looking over at the table she saw five large mugs of ale. Perfect, they were probably too drunk to fight.

Suddenly one of the friends charged at her full speed. The largest one. Virago smiled. It was almost too obvious. She jumped out of the way at the last second and him square in the back with her foot braced against his. The large man fell to the ground in an instant, knocking his head on the table. Without missing a beat, the other two men at the table charged her simultaneously. Obviously expected. Virago jumped, kicking one square in the forehead. She pushed off of him and landed a square punch with the last guy's jaw. This was good practice. She may need it with the deviant.

"Woah, woah, what's goin' on 'ere," said a voice from behind the crowd. There was a larger crowd now, but after seeing Virago in action, no one wanted to go against her. "This girl came in here lookin' for a fight," someone said. As the crowd parted, she saw who it was that had talked. It was a large man with a cigar hanging loosely in his mouth. He carried the stench of smoke with him while he walked. He studied her face and cocky grin. Then the man turned his attention to the fallen farmers.

"Looks like she was doin' more than lookin'," he said as he noticed she'd taken out three men with ease. "Why dontcha come have a drink with me girl. They call me Malarkey."

Virago nodded and followed him, saying, "Only if I'm getting free ale." This got a laugh out of Malarkey as he brought her over to the back end of the shop. This area was mostly clear and there was just a small room at the end of the corridor that she could see.

As they sat down, Malarkey asked Virago, "So, what brings ya to the great plain? This isn't much of a tourist attraction." He opened up a bottle of ale and poured out both of them a glass.

“I’m on my way to Endridge actually. It’s quite a while from here I spose.” Virago hoisted her legs onto the table, leaning back with confidence, as if she owned the place. Malarkey cocked his eyebrow before shaking his head and laughing. “Nah it ain’t much further. You just gotta follow the path that goes through the farmland over there and head for the giant waterfall in the distance. Hard to miss if you’re goin’ straight. But seriously. You walked into my tavern and knocked out three men. Who are you?”

Virago smiled, glad she had made such a fine first impression. It was always nice to have your skills appreciated. “My name is Virago, and I’ve seen plenty of wars in my life. I was in a battlio before.” Malarkey nodded, opening up another bottle. He was drinking much more than any one man should in a day. It was as if he were trying to drown some sorrow. “What nation, if I may ask.” Virago picked up her own mug and chugged down the entirety of it.

“Well that’s not really that important,” she said, avoiding the question. She couldn’t let anyone here know that she was from the northern kingdoms. It would alert people of the invasion. People from the northern continent didn’t come to the western continent. They weren’t allowed to after the war. It was one of the reasons Virago was so excited to travel with Gyblard. This land was so much different and she was getting the opportunity to see it.

“Well I won’t pry,” said Malarkey. He had a drunken look in his eye now as he opened up yet another bottle of ale. “Your business is your business.”

“My good sir, don’t you think you’ve had enough?” asked Virago, slightly concerned for the man’s health at this point. “Oh me? Naw, I could go all day... and I do!” This set him into a drunk fit of laughter, nearly toppling over his chair, which made Virago chuckle slightly herself.

“This is what it's about isn't it? Two strangers enjoyin' some beer in this scorchin' heat. Boy does the world have its way.” Malarkey dreamily stared up at the ceiling. Virago was beginning to like this man. He was jolly and friendly, completely unlike the people that she knew. Even Gylbard himself was so serious all the time. All he cared about was living up to his name and disaarraying his legacy from his father's and whatever. There was never really any time for fun back in Viserwen. The only time Virago had truly felt free was when she was at war. There were no rules there. There was almost a simplicity in hunting and killing that offered her some solace.

“So, Vygaro,” asked Malarkey. “Would you like to eat something?” he had completely messed up her name, but Virago didn't much care. “No sir. I killed some wolf back there in the woods. I got plenty of meat strapped to my steed to last me all the way to Endridge. Have you ever been there?” she asked.

Malarkey nodded slightly, starting to hiccup now. “It's a beautiful place of magic and wonder and all. The wizard does everything. He's getting old now I think.” A man walked into the room placing a plate of fried mushrooms and fresh fruits. Virago looked at his meal, slightly confused as to why he wasn't waiting for any meat, but didn't care much to ask anyway. “Ya you'll love it in Endridge.”

“Well I best be on my way now sir. I would like to pay you for your services though.” Virago took out her pouch of coins and dropped two golden coins on the table. Malarkey looked at them, confused for a second, before Virago realised what had happened. Her blood ran cold. The coins she had given him weren't the ones she had retrieved from Endridige. They were the ones from her home in Viserwen. In fact, it had the Vierwen seal on it.

Virago reached for her weapon as she looked around the room. The waiter that had brought Malarkey his food was already gone. There was nobody else in the room except them two. If she killed him right then and there, there would be people after her, she'd be outlawed. But if Malarkey somehow found out that she was from Viserwen, it would spell the end for Gylbard's pla . It was obvious what she needed to do.

At that moment, Malarkey let out a loud laugh and looked back up at her. "I dunno how you got these lass, but these coins are from the northern continent. You should count yourself very lucky. After the banishment of their currency, these are very rare to see in these parts. But anywho you don' haveta pay me. I promised free ale didn't I?" said Malarkey with a smile as he led Virago to the back door around the bar. The tavern had returned to its original peace and everyone was enjoying their time again. The band was playing a song again and there were people dancing now in the middle of the room.

Virago stepped back out into the scorching air outside the back and she could smell sea salt in the air. She turned back to Malarkey one last time. "Thank you for your services sir. I wish you well."

Malarkey nodded back to her saying, "I don't know what it is, but I gotta good feeling about you. You're gonna accomplish great things girl." Virago laughed, knowing that was true enough. After the invasion, she would probably get to control a kingdom or two. In that sense, Malarkey wasn't really wrong. Turning around, she made her way over to her Ferox and took the reins. There was a crowd gathered around her at the moment, staring at the creature. Patting the being's neck, Virago said, "Alright, let's give this audience a show." The Ferox chirped happily before jumping high up in the air and diving straight into the ground. Though she couldn't hear



it, Virago could feel the gasping of the shocked onlookers. They were able to easily borrow their way through the ground now that they were over sand now.

When the Ferox broke through the sand a little while later, they were quite a bit further from the tavern. Now, there was nothing ahead of her but an empty stretch of barren beach. Feeling the weight of the sun on her head and the long distance she had to go, Virago suddenly began to feel very tired. As she got off the horse, Virago lay on the beach, bracing her neck with a pile of sand. The warm sun was on her face and the gentle crashing of the waves could be heard. The deviant wouldn't be able to get that far, there was no way he could cover that much ground. As she was convincing herself of this, Virago drifted off into a deep sleep.

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The ground itself seemed to be shaking. Virago confusedly looked up. The Ferox hadn't moved an inch from where she had left it. Overhead, the sun had been masked by dark clouds and thunder could be heard in the distance. What was happening? This didn't feel like anything she had ever seen before. It was as if the Earth itself was angered. She stayed low on all fours as the shaking slowly faded. Back at the tavern, she would make out Malarkey sitting on the beach next to some green haired kid. As people started screaming and running away, three other people burst out of the room. And even though Virago was quite far, she knew who it was. The man's eyes were growing a bright red. It was as if he were illuminating the world with those eyes.

Virago smiled, shocked, but overjoyed at her luck. She had found the deviant without even trying. How had he caught up to her so quickly though? It didn't matter. What mattered was

that she was going to stop him from getting to Endridge and this meant Gylbard would be proud of her. With a confident mindset, Virago dived into the ground and made her way over to the others.

As she shot up on the other side. Virago quickly looked over the group. There were three kids and the deviant. Malarkey was also there, so she would have to kill him. That was okay though, as long as she got the deviant. While in midair, she turned her Ferox towards the group while she jumped off of her own, unsheathed her sword, and dived down towards the deviant. In the blink of an eye he brought out his own weapon and parried her. She smiled stepping back for a second, and the man smiled back at her. Finally, a challenge. This was going to be fun.

## **CHAPTER 8: Summertime**

A young boy with curly white hair barreled through the hallways, dodging through the expensive furniture and tapestry. Today was one of the most important days of his life. He was in the grand palace of Viserwen. To the right were giant wall to ceiling windows. Soft, silky curtains billowed in the soft wind of the Summertime. It wouldn't last long though. Summer was short in Viserwen. The rest of the year was bitter cold as the frost consumed everything in its sight. Right now though, everything was perfect. The empty hall was shaped like a large arc and had doors lining both sides. There were beautiful paintings of Viserwen and Northern history covering the walls and ceilings. They had been painted centuries ago and were constantly being added. A new painting stood just outside the royal bedroom. The doors were completely open and Gylbard could see inside. The whole room was enormous, almost the size of the banquet hall downstairs. A giant bed lay towards the center of the room. If one wanted to, they could fit about

twenty people on that bed, though it would be a squeeze. On the right end of the room was another window, like he had seen before. This one led to a vast porch outside. It was the same one Gylbard's father used to address his people. The whole room was white, top to bottom. A clean color, his father always said. It helped him keep peace of mind and tranquility when in there. There was a seating area to the left with around fifteen chairs surrounding a very long table. Right now, though, the room was completely empty. There was no one in it.

Gylbard looked confused. His father was returning today. He should have arrived before Gylbard had woken up. It didn't matter. His father had left when he was eight, and now he was twelve. If he waited four years, what was a couple more hours?

Suddenly, he heard a soft sobbing coming from downstairs. He ran back to the staircase. There was an imperial staircase that led to the common hall. It was slightly difficult to maneuver around a castle for a stranger. The whole place was a labyrinth and one could often find themselves lost in the similar looking halls. Not Gylbard though. He could find his way to any corner of the room with his eyes closed.

He jogged down the staircase to the sound of the sobbing. Who could it be? It was probably Virago. She was always crying whenever she got slightly hurt. Then Gylbard would get in trouble for pushing her, but it wasn't even that serious. This sound, though, came from an adult. As he cornered the hall downstairs and went into the sun room facing the eastern borders of Viserwen, he saw a crowd of people gathered around someone. Standing up on his toes, he could make out the faint outline of his mother.

“Mother... is that you? Move aside!” he said to the guards and court members. He tried pushing past everyone to the center of the circle. One man put his arm out in front of him and brought him back, with some difficulty.

“Calm down prince Gylbard,” he said, trying to restrain the squirming child. “Everything is okay. Your mother is alright. Why don’t you go find your friends and play somewhere? I’m sure your mother would rather be alone at the moment.”

Gylbard looked up to see who it was. The old man’s face was that of chancellor Wacer. He was the right hand man to his father during the war. They had traveled the world together. Right now, he looked really worn out and tired. But this meant that his father had returned! The ships must have recently arrived.

“Chancellor I’m so glad to see you. Where is father?” asked Gylbard, looking around over the group to see where his father was. Wacer nodded slowly avoiding direct eye contact with the boy as he made his way back over to the group. “Go along and play now son, you’ll get your answers soon enough. It’s just not time. ”

Gylbard looked back at him, confused. Something was terribly wrong. The first thing Gylbard’s father would have done was come to meet his wife and son. He apparently hadn’t done either. As he entered the mostly empty common hall, he was tacked to the ground. The laughing child on top of him was Virago. “Not now, something’s wrong,” said Gylbard, jumping back up, furious at his friend.

Virago looked at him confused. “Why do you sound so serious? I was just having fun.” She stood up herself and jumped up on the tables hopping from them to the couches. Virago had always been adventurous and liked performing crazy stunts all over the house. She got hurt all

the time, and would cry for hours sometimes, but would go back to jumping all over the place the next instant. Even though she was just a year younger than Gylbard himself, Virago was very immature. She didn't instant the importance of her position either. Virago was the daughter of Chancellor Wacer, the to be chancellor of Viserwen. And Gylbard was to be king.

"Mother was crying, and your father won't tell me what's wrong. I don't get it. She should be overjoyed at father's return, but she's not. Come on Virago, we have to see what's going on. We can check the docks. If father has returned already, his ship should be there."

Virago jumped down and ran over to Gylbard. "The docks? But we're not allowed to leave the palace anymore. If we're found by anyone, we'll get in major trouble. Besides, remember how angry your mom had been last time we were caught?" Ignoring what Virago had just said, Gylbard dashed for the kitchen, he knew an easy way out without anyone seeing him. Though he didn't look back, he knew Virago was following him. She usually did whatever Gylbard told her to. They dodged through corridor and hallway, almost making an error in their direction, before finally arriving at the kitchen.

They both snuck under the counter of the kitchen. There were many servants hastily making food. The loud shouting from all around them was apparent. They were so busy and engrossed in their work, though, that they didn't even notice the kids who dived into the dumbwaiter at the far end of the kitchen. The both comfortably sat in the wide dumbwaiter as Gylbard slowly closed the door behind him, making sure not to make the slightest sound.

Through the complete darkness, Gylbard pulled the rope placed on the inside next to the dumbwaiter. It had been a slight design flaw, but one that was beneficial for the kids. They went down instead of going up, though, reached a long chute. An unbearable stench filled the place.

“Eww, couldn’t we have gone after it had been cleaned,” said Virago as she shimmied her way behind Gylbard into the chute. “It doesn't matter, we don’t have time,” said Gylbard, putting his legs forward and crossing his arms over his chest. This was always the worst part. He hated traveling down the chute. It was so dark and scary and he had no control over his actions. As Gylbard closed his eyes and took a deep breath, he pushed forward, sliding down faster and faster. A dim light was accelerating towards him at the end of the seemingly infinite tunnel.

In a few seconds, he was shot out the back end into a pile of garbage outside the fortified walls of the palace. It hadn’t been collected yet. The whole street, in fact, was lined with garbage. Behind him, he heard Virago screeching with joy. “WHEEEEE!” as she herself shot out into the garbage. “That was so fun!” she said making her way over to Gylbard, who was still trying to calm down his racing heart. He nodded, not trying to look scared in front of her, as he stepped over the piles of garbage, making his way over to the edge of the narrow alleyway.

They both probably stunk now of the foul smelling garbage. They raced now, through the streets of Viserwen, careful to keep their heads low and moving fast. Kids were always running through the streets. It was sort of thrilling for Gylbard as well. Being undercover was a dangerous thing, but it was so fun going back knowing you were never caught. If people found out who he was, they may try to kidnap him or hold him ransom, at least that's what he was taught back at the palace. Although, he never really believed it. The people of Viserwen were friendly and seemed so kind. As he was thinking this, Glybard looked up, seeing the beautiful kingdom of Viserwen. The streets were lined with cottages made of stone, wood, and straw. Surrounding the seaboard length were guards. There were none on the north end of the kingdom because it was blocked by giant mountains. No one lived on the other side of the mountain.

Besides the occasional bear, nothing ever came down from there. Across the waters, Gylbard could see the kingdom of Fluctus. There was a thin stretch of water between them and Viserwen, Although, not many people ventured to the Nero Crescent. Most of the Viserwen trading happened at the western port from which the western continent's ships arrived. Although, because of the war, they obviously didn't arrive anymore.

In the far distance, Gylbard could make out the image of a bright light shooting up towards the sky. It was the magic of the wizard. Gylbard had often heard his father discussing his plans in his room with his generals. They had talked about how the wizard was going to be their greatest adversary in this war. Shaking his head, trying to block out these unnecessary thoughts, Gylbard approached the docks, sneakily getting past the guards.

"There is it!" he whispered to Virago as they crouched behind a barrel on the docks. Even if the chancellor had arrived on a different boat, this proved that his father had returned. He must have still been on the ship, though, if he hadn't come home. Gylbard had a smile on his face as he made his way over to the ship, constantly crouching, trying to avoid attention being drawn to him. He made his way onto the ship. That was strange, there was barely anyone on it. Usually there was a whole battalion assigned to the king at all times to ensure his safety. Where were they now?

Once inside the ship, they walked over to the sleeping quarters of the king. The boat wasn't much of a spectacle in and of itself. It was small, making it easy to maneuver. The king preferred this greatly to traveling in a large noticeable boat, even though it offered him less protection.

“Father!” called out Gylbard. “Maybe he already left,” said Virago. Gylbard shook his head pointing to the clothes scapptered around the bed and the case that lay slightly ajar at the foot of the bed. He would have cleaned up if he had returned back to the palace. At that moment, he heard two pairs of footsteps approaching the boat. They both dived into the king’s room and under the bed.

“Load up those boxes back there will ya?” said the first man. From under the bed, Gyblard could see their uniforms. They were sailors, maybe they’d even been on the same boat as his father.

“Too bad what happened back there huh?” said the second sailor as he began loading the boxes onto some kind of wheeled cart.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. It was a goddamn massacre. I almost got stabbed twice. You almost blew out your own arm with that cannon.” They began to chuckle slightly. There was pain in their laugh though. The pain of loss and mourning. Soldiers that returned to war were often traumatized.

“I’ll never forget the king’s sacrifice though. If he hadn’t surrendered back there, maybe none of us would be alive right now.” They both awkwardly scuffled around the lower deck of the boat, trying to gather whatever they could.

“Hey shut up,” said the first man again. “We can’t go around saying that anymore. Everyone’s posed to think he died. We can’t let anyone know or it’ll be our heads. Is that clear?” The other man got silent before saying quietly, “Ya.”

Gylbard felt as if the world had come crashing down on him. His mind began to race as he was thinking back to his mother crying and all those officers standing in his house. His father



had supposedly died. At that point he also realised, his father hadn't died. He had been a coward. Instead of standing by his men, he had surrendered. A flood of anger overcame him as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Looking back, still crouching quietly under the bed, Virago looked towards Gylbard with sad eyes. She seemed to feel and sense Gylbard's pain, but it had been quickly overcome by hatred instead. Hatred for his father. His whole life, he had been taught to keep on fighting no matter what. To never give into the enemy. And that's exactly what his father had done. He had given in. He had surrendered.

Blinded with rage, Gylbard stepped out from under the bed without even thinking. "No, wait!" Virago whispered after him. The two men looked at him with confusion. "Who are you bo-. Oh my gawd. It's prince Gylbard." They both bowed, gulping back, wishing they could take back their words. Virago sheepishly stepped out from behind him.

Gylbard pushed past the two men and rushed back onto the streets. Hot tears were welling up behind his eyes, threatening to fall. From everywhere, he could hear the gasping of guards and civilians alike. The prince was running through the streets. A few of them called out to him, while others gave a respectful bow. Gylbard didn't notice and he honestly didn't care. Nothing mattered to him anymore. His name and his family's name was permanently damaged. All his father had to do was die, and he would have returned a legend. Instead, if even a single person found out about what had happened, Gylbard would be ridiculed for the rest of his life.

"Gylbard, stop!" yelled from behind him. Virago was following him. She couldn't leave him alone. Not now, like this. He was often very rash. Who knows what Gylbard was going to do. As they ran through street corners and between carts, Gylbard ran into the dead end of an

alleyway and hid behind two crates lying in the corner. Virago approached him, panting from the run. She could hear Gylbard lightly sniffing.

“Gylbard you need to stop running so fast. Are you okay?” she asked, making her way over to him.

“Leave me alone!” he yelled at her, crying now, softly. There had never been a time when Gylbard had cried like this. He couldn’t understand what it was. He didn’t care about his father, if he could even call him that. What he had heard had left him scarred and angry, so why did he feel this much pain?

Virago leaned against the crates and sat next to him, blinking back a few tears herself. “He was such a nice man. Remember when we all went to Meertrov for the peace treaty and we went along? That was the longest boat ride ever. He bought us so many candies along the way.” She smiled slightly. Gylbard had stopped crying, remembering his father. He had been a good man. There was no doubt that he loved Gylbard very much.

They both sat there now, in silence. Two royal children, in the back of a dirty alleyway. Of course there would be people looking for them, but it didn’t matter. It felt good to just sit there and do nothing. Gylbard looked up, staring at the sky. He knew what the death meant. He, being the only child, would have to take on the responsibilities of king. That thought pleased him slightly. It was going to be hard work, but something Gylbard was willing to do.

After what felt like hours, Gylbard slowly stood up, prompting Virago to as well. “Okay, I’m okay. Let’s go back.” This was far from the truth, but he was feeling better than before, much better. Virago smiled at him as they snuck back through the alleyway walking along a fence bordering the edge to the palace. They both shimmied their way back up the dumbwaiter, this

was much more difficult, and roped down the platform, making sure they cleared their hands in time before it got all the way down. When they climbed back up, the kids noticed the palace was completely empty.

There was no one in the kitchen cooking food for the royal family, as there should be. All the guards that usually patrolled the halls were not there either.

“Where is everyone? This place looks deserted,” said Virago, looking around. “I don’t know, let’s check upstairs.” Gylbard stepped out and made his way to the staircase.

Upstairs, he noticed the door to his parent’s room was wide open. Through it, he could hear loud murmurs of a crowd. Usually, this was only the case when his father was giving some speech. Confused, the kids went inside. Across the great room, someone was giving a speech. It was Virago’s father, Chancellor Wacer. Below him, the children could see the crowd of people. It seemed as if the whole kingdom had arrived to hear the speech.

They both approached him, without making themselves visible to the crowd, they had gotten accustomed to this by now. “And I regret to inform you... the king has died in battle. It is then, with a heavy heart, that I accept his majesty's dying wish to take upon his position as king and continue the lineage with my own kin.”

Gylbard’s eyes widened with shock. No... No! This wasn’t possible. He was supposed to be king. That was his destiny. He had been born to the royal family. He had attended the signing of every royal decree. He was the prince! They couldn’t do this to him. Seeing the children behind him, the chancellor quickly concluded his speech before making his way back into the room. His mother followed him, still stricken with grief.

“My dear boy, I’m sorry you had to find out this way,” said Wacer as he tried to approach Gylbard, who put a hand out in front of him and started making his way over to his room. No one followed him. No one could. They could only imagine the kind of pain he was going through. First his father had died, and now he had learned he wasn’t going to be king. Inside he felt like he knew. I mean, he was very young. They couldn’t just entrust the nation to him. But there was a third pain, that no one knew Gylbard had. He now knew the truth behind what had happened to his father. And it was obvious that Wacer knew as well.

Gylbard slammed the door behind him as he entered his room. The entire place seemed to be spinning around him. None of this made any sense, and it was all happening so fast. It almost felt like a bad dream. As he jumped onto his bed, which had been tidied before he’d arrived, his door began to slowly creak open. “Get out Virago. I won’t ask again.”

“It’s me, fauntkin,” said the voice. It was his mother, queen Lamina. Well, ex queen now. She sat on the edge of the bed facing away from Gylbard, whose throat had closed up and tears threatened to fall again. She placed a gentle hand on his head and pushed back his hair. “I know what you must be going through. I feel the pain. He was my husband. I loved him. But right now, we need to stay strong. Think about what your father would have wanted.”

Gylbard turned to face her. His mother was always beautiful. She had long flowing white hair, that’s where he got his own hair color. They both shared piercing blue eyes. His mother’s clothing and composure was always perfect. She had taught Gylbard to act as if thousands of people were watching you, even if you were alone. It was her way to make sure he behaved. Right now, she wore a flowing white gown with beautiful white flowers embroidered on it. She had stopped crying from when he had seen her before. Even though she looked mournful,

Gylbard knew she was trying to stay strong. It wasn't a choice. Their kingdom was starting to slide downhill. They had spent a lot of money into fighting the war, and now there was a good chance it would have all been for waste.

"Mother, why did he do it? We always knew he was going to go fight... but why? What did he want?" asked Gylbard, sitting up now. His father had never discussed his plans to Gylbard. Just that he was leaving. His mother nodded for a second, acknowledging the question. "Son, the continents have a rich history. I myself only just know a little, though I'm well read in history. The fact is, your father was just trying to help his people. His actions may not always have been justified, he killed and slaughtered sometimes, but only when necessary. Everything your father did was for Viserwen. He governed Vierserwen. He fought for Viserwern. He died for Viserwen."

"But why this, why like this? He didn't need to go!" cried out Gylbard, hugging his mother. He was loudly sobbing now.

"I know my fauntkin, it's okay. One thing I know is that your father was very logical. If he thought that there was any other way to help his kingdom he would have. But it's too late now anyways." There was no sound outside the room. Everyone had left them alone. The loud murmurs outside had stopped as well. All of Viserwen was mourning the loss of the king. They had known and loved him as much as Gylbrd. He had been a good man and a good ruler. He always cared for the country's financial system and gave more to his people and kept little to himself and for the rest of his royal council.

"Did you know that Wacer was going to be the next king?" asked Gylbard now, thinking back to what he had overheard in his parent's room. "Your father had told me before he left. He

said the kingdom was in good hands with him. Besides, he didn't think you should bear the burden of maintaining his mistakes. It wouldn't be right of him to ask you to inherit a debted kingdom. The war is going to end soon, and governing is going to difficult son. You're too young to have to deal with it anyway. This was your father's way of taking care of us one last time, by removing the responsibility from over our heads."

It was a difficult thing to imagine. The old man was going to be king now and Virago was going to be the princess of Viserwen. Even though he realised why his father had done it, Gylbard couldn't help but feel hatred for Wacer. He had taken the only thing that Gylbard had to his name, his title. Without that, he was nothing. He was just another kid, roaming the streets like a commoner. In fact, he could barely imagine how his mother was coping.

"I have to go now fauntkin," she said, making her way across the room. "There is a lot of work that needs to be done. I want you to get some rest. It's been a long day." She gave him a gentle smile as she left the room, leaving Gylbard alone with his thoughts, which were getting very dangerous. The only thing he could think about was how selfish his father was. He had fought in the war and surrendered. But more than that, he had taken everything from Gylbard. He had cut off the royal line. He had made Wacer of a people the king. How could he? Anger started boiling inside him now. No matter what, he had to get his title back. There was only one thing he could do. Gylbard was going to have to kill Wacer.

## **CHAPTER 9: Disturbing the Party**

"We have to go, now!" said Mites to Treva and Felix who looked confused. Running over back to their hideout, they saw exactly what Mites was talking about. Oh boy, their lives just got a lot harder. There was a large crowd gathered around Akuldra. He was standing in the middle,

just trying to say away from people while covering his eyes. They all ran up to him and pushed between the crowd to the barn.

“Sorry, sorry, excuse me, my bad. Can everyone please step back!” Curmo yelled over the noise as the people slightly quieted down. “I implore you to leave our good friend here alone,” said Bella behind him, loud enough so that everyone could hear.

“Well... friend is a bit of a strong word,” Treva chimed in. “At least me and my brother just met him. Your quarrel with this man doesn’t involve us!”

“Did you hear that!” said a bearded man ahead of the crowd. “They’re with the deviant. Probably snuck him in here too. Get them too!”

Quickly they pushed past the crowd and into the barn. With all their might, the six of them pushed the large stable doors and locked them, even bringing over their carriage to the back of the van before they all turned around to look at Akuldra. The room was practically dark. There were no windows and only a dimly lit candle lay on the desk over at the side of the room, but you could still see the anger fuming from Akuldra’s face.

“What the hell happened back there?!” exclaimed Curmo. The sound of the rioters could be heard loud and clear behind them. They were banging on the door now and screaming loudly. Some tried to grab them by sticking their hands through the bottom of the door, which only resulted in Felix jumping practically ten feet in the air. “Get out here you goddamn deviant!”

“I don’t know! I was just lying here peacefully, minding my own business. Then some guy came up to me asking if Fideli was back. The next thing I know he noticed my eyes and brought a whole crowd. Honestly, I don’t know what the problem is with deviants here. I was a hero back at Folsele for protecting the people. These people are treating me like a bloody

outlaw.” Akuldra was practically fuming now, straining hard against the door trying to keep everyone out. It seemed, from the sound of it, that the crowd had grown even larger than before

“Alright, everybody just shut up! I need to think.” Treva placed her fingers over her temples as she was pacing the room. Her eyes were closed. No matter what they came up with, Curmo was sure he wouldn’t like it. It would be hard now though. These people had probably surrounded the whole barn by now. They couldn’t get out of there without being noticed. Unless they used... that's it!

“We can sneak out of this tunnel here. No one knows about it.” Treva turned now to the group and lifted up the loose floorboards. “Once we’re on the other side, all we have to do is blend in like we’re innocent. And for god’s sake, cover up your eyes.” She pointed to Akuldra with this last remark who shrugged and nodded. It had given him away almost everywhere and seemed to keep getting him in trouble. Treva was right.

“There’s just one thing,” said Akuldra. “How do you expect me to crawl through that.” He motioned over his large physique. He was barely going to be able to get through, but there was no other way out either. “Well then do you have any other brilliant escape plans?” asked Treva sarcastically. She ran over to the hole and motioned for the other to follow her. Curmo and Bella both looked at each other. This wasn’t going to be fun. They shrugged and followed Treva, with Mites and Felix on their tail. Akuldra still stood by the barn door, trying to keep everyone at bay, but he knew he had to go soon as well. With all this commotion, the guards would be on them soon enough.

Quickly, he ran over to the others across the room. “Alright, hurry up. This won’t hold them.” Felix was the first one going down, he was also the skinniest. He turned back to look at



the equex, his friend one last time. It may be a good while till he sees him again. Hippo neighed and trotted over to Felix, nudging him in the face. “By the way do I have to be the first?” asked Felix nervously. The idea of going through the tunnel was bad enough, but that he would have to go first. Behind them now, the splinters of the wood started breaking as the post that was holding the doors shut creaked slightly as well. Akuldra quickly ran back and removed the two axels from the carriages back wheels, allowing it to properly support the doors. “We don’t have much time! Hurry up” he said. He could hear axes against the door now.

“Felix, sweetheart, there aren’t many people that I’d want alive, but you’re one of them, please go. Now.” Treva was starting to get slightly impatient and panicky. Felix, sensing this, quickly started making his way through the dirt. A feeling of claustrophobia almost immediately kicked in as he was submerged in the complete darkness. The cold tunnel walls seemed to be closing in on him as he tried wiggling forward with his arms. He could feel the soggy dirt against his arms and legs, and Felix could almost swear he felt worms as well. This was the worst thing he’d ever had to do. Why did he agree to journey with these people? Was he stupid. Right now he felt pretty stupid. Soon enough though, the small tunnel came to an opening as Felix climbed out faster than he ever had before. “Yes! Sunlight.” He lay on the ground, slightly out of breath, but smiling. That was probably the most adventurous thing he’d ever done in his life.

Back in the barn, Treva went down after Felix. They were going in the order of those most likely to make it to the other side to the least. She crawled through pretty easily and made it to the other side within seconds. Bella went after her, and then Curmo. The wood holding the door in place was almost completely broken now, the only thing holding the rioters back was the heavy carriage.

Mites and Akuldra were the only ones left in the barn, the oldest and largest ones of the group. Before going down after Curmo, though, Mites hesitated for a second. "What're you doing!" yelled Akuldra shouting over the sound of the crowd. "Hurry up and get in that hole." He was straining now more than ever to hold back the others. When the first axes spliced completely through the wood, though, he stepped back.

"No, you go before me!" said Mites. "I can cover up the floorboards before we leave. They won't even know how we got out." Akuldra nodded, placing a hand on Mites. The man was brave. With a deep breath, he pushed into the hole, and immediately regretted it. There was no room for him to crawl. His arms were basically pinned against his sides as he squirmed, basically stuck. "Hey! Can anyone hear me! I think I'm stuck!" said Akuldra. Mites definitely couldn't. He could barely hear his own thoughts over the sound of the Endrigers outside.

Although, Akuldra heard a response from the other side of the tunnel. "Ya, loud and clear." It was Treva. "Stick your feet into the dirt and push forward. It's the only way for you to move." Akuldra squirmed a little more, trying to get his feet into position. He slammed them into the side of the tunnel, displacing a lot of the dirt. Honestly, he was scared the whole thing would collapse on him. Bending his knees slightly forward, he pushed off of the dirt to slide. It was working! Slowly and steadily, Akuldra kept pushing.

"Hey be careful! I'm back here!" It was Mites, right behind Akuldra. "Mites, did you close the floorboards behind you?"

Mites nodded before realizing Akuldra couldn't see him. "Ya," he responded trying to wedge forward himself. "Now keep moving! This is hard enough one at a time." Behind them, the two heard the sound of the villagers finally breaking into the barn. Hippo neighed, cowering

to the side as more and more people crawled into the room, some carrying pitchforks and others knives. They all stopped shouting, though, when they realized everyone had disappeared. They all confusedly looked around the room.

On the other side, Akuldra climbed out of the tunnel and into the brightness of daytime, before reaching back and helping Mites up as well. They were across a small street between the barn and a few small houses. The tunnel led directly to an alleyway, so it was a good bet that no one had seen them.

“Is everyone okay,” asked Bella as she counted heads. “Just barely,” Akuldra responded, covering up the hole with the {} had found lying near them.

Treva stood up, carefully looking back and forth across the street to make sure there were no onlookers. There were none. She signaled the others to follow her as she made her way across the streets towards the castle. “Umm... I’m sorry why are we going towards the place where there are tons of guards?” asked Curmo, practically whispering, though he didn’t really know why. Treva sighed, turning to him. “They’re going to be looking all over the place for Akuldra, and probably us now too. No one expects us to be near the castle. Also, if the guards hear news of a deviant, they’ll definitely be leaving their posts.” Akuldra rolled his eyes again, still not understanding why his presence was so concerning. “This means we can probably go in now. It should be safe as long as there’s a low chance of them seeing us.”

They were running through the streets, all while trying to blend in. Whenever they saw a guard riding a horse on the main paths, the party ducked into allies, which seemed to be in plentiful supply around Endridge. Akuldra, although trying to keep his eyes hidden, wasn’t all too incognito. He was a difficult man to try and hide. His large body made that difficult for him.

Although, no one really stopped them all the way as they made their way to the final row of homes before arriving at the castle.

Standing near it made it all the more spectacular. The giant stone archways that stretched between the towers almost didn't look real. The castle was actually slightly bobbing up and down, as if a boat on water, but when compared to the mere size of it, made sense that it wasn't visible.

When looking towards the northern bridge, they could all see that Treva was right. The guards had left their post. There was still the gate and guards inside the castle, but if they went through the waterway, there wouldn't be anyone looking towards them. They could sneak in without suspicion. Now the only difficulty was sneaking in.

"Alright this is looking good," said Treva, smiling at their luck. "Even better actually. Since its broad daylight, we don't have to dive in unknowingly. Akuldra, when you get inside, release something back into the water that can float up. We should be able to see it and then we'll come in after you." Looking around, she picked up an empty glass bottle discarded to the side. Luckily, the cork was still also there. "I really hate to do this, garbage like this shouldn't go into the lake. But what choice do we really have? When you're inside, throw this back up into the water with the cork intact. It should float to the surface. When we see it, we'll dive in after you."

Akuldra nodded, taking the bottle from Treva's hand and making his way over to the castle, all while keeping his head low. Endrigers were more or less used to the sight of the castle and didn't tend to venture near it. The only people to go near the castle and the moat were tourists of Endridge, who, after hearing all the commotion, had decided they would rather stay indoors.

He jogged slightly, the adrenaline pumping through his veins. He reached into his right coat pocket and felt the parchment from the Viserwen battle plans. It was still with him. This was going to have to work. They were going to have to get in, no matter what. If they didn't, his father's sacrifice would have been futile. In his other pocket, on his cloak, was the bottle, which he held close to him. There was no one around, and if he jumped into the water, the sound of the rapids would cover his own. Now all he had to do was jump.

Looking back, he saw the others watching him from behind the cottage. Felix meekly gave him a thumbs up and Bella gave him a reassuring nod. Treva looked at him, almost impatiently. He smiled slightly. That kid had heart, he liked her. There was a couple of other merchants walking by, but they didn't pay much mind to Akuldra. People approached the castle all the time. This was nothing new. With one final breath, making sure the merchants were looking away, Akuldra quickly dived into the rapids, the cold water shocking his face and body altogether.

The rough water pushed against his body, trying to drag him off the waterfall as he swam towards the castle with all his strength. Keeping his eyes open, Akuldra could see the underwater gate that Treva had been talking about. It wasn't too far from him. It wasn't even that far below the water. The only difficulty was pushing through the rapids, which wasn't that hard for Akuldra, but it would definitely be a struggle for the kids. His vision was slightly blurred, but he could still see clearly enough to make his way over the gate. The sound of the rushing water was extremely loud, and this added with the freezing cold water made Akuldra's head pound as he swam towards the gate.

Grabbing onto the bars, he could see the tunnel inside. There was a long incline inside the castle that led up to the lower tunnels. Akuldra began to pry the bars apart with all his might. He mustered every bone in his body to try and pull apart the metal columns. They were difficult to budge, all the much more since he was underwater. At that moment, he left something sliding by his body directly to the left. Thinking it was a snake, he flinched, looking down. To his horror, Akuldra saw the bottle that he thought was secure slowly surfacing.

No! Before he could grab it, though, the water pulled it away from him and surfaced it about twenty feet up ahead. Akuldra began pulling harder now, his supply of breath running low. Unfortunately, there were a series of splashes right behind him. Looking back, he saw five other bodies swimming ferociously towards him. The current must've been a lot easier for him than it was for them. Upon seeing Akuldra still struggling with the gate, Mites' eyes widened.

Looking back, Akuldra signaled for him to come closer. He would need help if he was to get this open. Everyone else swam up to him as well, equally as concerned as Mites about the gate not being wide enough for them yet. They all grabbed onto the outer edge of the gate, their bodies flailing against the current, trying not to lose their grip. Mites made his way over to Akuldra and started pulling with all his strength as was Akuldra. The gate creaked, budging a little more than it had before. Soon enough, a small wide opening was formed.

Akuldra quickly swam up to the surface, gasping for air as he did. He had done it. Even though it was with the help of Mites, he had gotten into the castle. He climbed up the sloppy incline towards the top of the tunnel as he lay on the ground. The rushing water flooded the lower end of the incline, but the tunnel reached above sea water, discluding the spraying of the

water on his face. Behind him, he heard the others gasp as they squeezed through the bars and into the tunnels themselves, shivering and gasping for air.

The echo of every little noise they made resonated from the walls and back. All of them inched and clawed their way in the incline trying to get to the surface.

They all lay there in silence, equally shocked and tired. It was almost peaceful being down there. A sense of calmness flooded the tunnels. Standing up first, Felix leaned against the wall, trying to shake off all the water from his head. He was shivering, the uncomfortable cold air freezing him down to his bone. There was also a strong, musty odor that lay in the air. These walls had probably never been breached for many years. Large strings of algae and moss caked the walls and ceiling. There were carvings in the walls that were barely visible. Brushing those behind him, Felix could make out the image of people swimming in the sea. Their legs coming together and forming a kind of fin. These people were swimming through a tunnel just the one they were in now. They carried something in their hands, though Felix couldn't make out exactly what it was.

"Why did you release the bottle if you weren't ready?" Felix's attention immediately snapped back the group as he heard Treva say this, quite faintly. "It slipped. But doesn't matter now... we're in." responded Akuldra slowly getting up.

He took out the battle plans from his pocket and laid it flat on the floor. It was wet, but this hadn't ruined too much of the writing. "From the looks of it, no one even knows this place exists, much less has any idea that we're here. Getting in shouldn't be the problem. The only thing I'm worried about is getting you two out." Akuldra was now scouting the area. Looking around for any panels or doors that would allow them access to the upper floors.

“I have that part all figured out.” said Treva. “The royal family has over a hundred people as help. When we leave, we can leave through one of the back doors with the rest of the servants and no one will even know we were in here. Just don’t mention anything about us when you go to the king alright?”

Akuldra nodded, now bringing his attention over to Bella and Curmo. “And what did I tell the two of you? I asked you to stay back. We have no idea what we’re dealing with here, the less people we have go inside the better.”

Curmo stood up now, still shivering from the cold, and responded, “Did you not see what happened back there? The whole town’s probably looking for us now. I’d rather confront the king than angry villagers out there. Besides, you don’t really seem to have everything under control, so I might need to be here regardless.” Secretly, Curmo was also excited to see the inside of the castle for the first time. There weren’t many people that got that privilege. He was still shaken up from the tide, he didn’t expect it to be that fast. Although, with all that they’d been through, he didn’t feel as scared as he did in the beginning.

“Well, I’d much rather’ve been out there,” said Felix looking around. Everyone was just drying off and no one responded. “Ya alright. Makes sense.”

Akuldra shook his head, going over to Mites to help him up. “Just don’t get caught before we get to the king. They might get suspicious of us if you do.” Mites nodded smiling. They all started walking through the tunnels now. Each step they took echoes across the stone walls and back to them. Mites led the way, making turns at every periodic corner. The halls all mostly looked the same. They were circular tunnels which, like the barn, were mostly dark. The only source of light was the periodic window, which was just barely enough to move around.



“I had been looking into the internal architecture of the building ever since Treva had seen the tunnels a few years ago. They were some kind of trading docks with fish people. The royal family hasn’t used them in a long time, though. But, if I have correctly navigated out paths... there should be a ladder right at this corner.” Sure enough, as they turned the next corner, there was a ladder leading up to an opening on the ceiling.

Mites went up first, telling the others to stay completely silent. Once the hatch was open, there would be nothing protecting them from being heard. Mites pushed hard against the hatch, it seemed quite heavy, but soon, it began to budge, and slowly lifted open. The grating of the stone on stone was quite loud and they all froze for a moment, wondering if anyone had heard. When no footsteps came, Mites pushed the block of stone up all the way. He peeked out slowly into the unknown.

They were in a dark room, but unlike the tunnels before, it was completely dark. There was not a slight hint of light. Mites stepped out slowly, beckoning the others to follow him. Akuldra followed, then Curmo, Bella, Treva, and finally Felix, who was still contemplating staying in the tunnels, but it was much colder back there. They were immediately greeted with a horrifying smell. Unlike the musty odor in the tunnels, this one was much stronger and thicker. It smelled like the ocean, but ten times stronger. Curmo felt as if he were about to puke.

“Hey watch it!” said Treva as Bella bumped into her. “I’m sorry, but I can’t see a thing.” They all groped around trying to find each other, before locking hands with one another to form a chain. “Everyone stay quiet back there,” said Mites as he felt around for a candle. Suddenly he hit a desk in front of him. On it, he lit a candle and held it up. Instinctively, Akuldra’s hand went over Felix’s mouth, who actually was about to scream.

They were in a small stone lined room with the hatch to the tunnels all the way to the back. On all the walls were the rotting flesh of fish tails, but nothing ordinary. They were hung up on gold and silver plates, as if representing a prize. These fins were much bigger than they had seen on any fish though.

“Do you think...” started Treva quietly, putting a hand over her nose. Curmo grimly nodded, disgusted by it. “I want to get out of here... right now,” whispered Bella. Mites nodded looking around for the door, which he found all the way to the left of the room. He quickly ushered everyone outside into the empty corridor outside. There was a single door to the end of it, and to the other side was a large window, overlooking the great waterfall. In fact, this corridor seemed to be the easternmost point of the castle.

They all moved silently towards the door, making sure they weren't heard. “Alright. Once we're on the other side, you all can go your way and we'll go our way. If you want to find the king or the rest of the royal family, you'll need to get to the second floor. You can't miss it if you see it up there. If you still want to loot and get out, you can join us, but good luck with your plan. We're not going to be able to break you out once you go to jail though.” Mites gave a smile to Akuldra who returned.

“I know you won't believe us, but the northern kingdoms are coming. The age of another continental war is nigh.” He looked grimly towards Mites now, who could tell Akuldra was serious, but didn't want to believe him. Shaking off the momentary notion of doubt, he shook his head and smiled back up at Akuldra again. “Well, I guess this is where we part. It's been a pleasure.” They both shook hands and nodded. With a large sigh, they pushed open the final door.

The door led them to a much larger room. This hall had many doors surrounding it. Each seemed unique and for a purpose. The one they were behind was marked with three squiggles as if representing the water and ocean. This one was more worn out than the others. Some were marked with a red plus, probably representing health and medicine. There were also those with arrows and spears, most likely meant for the weapons room.

With one final nod, Mites started moving left, towards a door marked with Endridge currency. Treva looked back at Felix one last time, with a smile as she waved back towards him. Felix gulped nervously and awkwardly waved back. Treva then turned around and sprinted to catch up with Mites. She ran silently, as he'd seen Akuldra do before.

"Alright, listen. This place is probably riddled with guards. We're going to have to move quickly and quietly. Don't make a sound or we're all dead." Bella, Curmo, and Felix nodded, moving forward behind Akuldra. The room that they were in had beautiful golden columns that stretched from the ground to the ceiling. They were all laced with the images of different animals, most notably bears and snakes. The room was circular with each door placed evenly between aligned. There was nothing here that was out of place. The floor held a pattern of flowers that circled around the room. Everything in here seemed larger than life. It was something out of a fairy tale. Beyond the circular room, to the two sides were hallways that led to more enormous halls and two long staircases. All four of them were awestruck at the sight of the inside of the castle. They had never seen a more majestic place before. It made them feel so insignificant.

Suddenly, two voices began to approach them. They were the voices of guards, who were making their way over to the large room. Akuldra dived down, and the rest followed in pursuit. They slid behind a large couch and waited there. They all held their breath.

“Who's there!” said one of the voices loudly. Curmo’s blood ran cold. No, no, no. They came all this way and they were just going to be put in jail. Then they heard a laugh coming from the other guard. “Ya that’s exactly what I would’ve done if she walked into my room unannounced.”

Curmo felt relief and anger at the same time. Destiny itself seemed to be playing some cruel trick on them. Bella was smiling, though, more relieved than angry, as the voices slowly dimmed away. Felix looked as if he were about to die. Akuldra, risking a peek, saw that they had gone into the weapons room. Seeing that there was nobody else around, he jerked his head towards the weaponry room himself, indicating that might be the best place to go. They all crouched low and dashed towards the weapons room, nearly avoiding getting seen by two other guards. Akuldra nudged the door open and didn’t see many others there. Just the two guards they had seen before and one other person. Very quietly, they turned into the first corner into the hallway.

On the walls of this room hung battle armour from all sizes. They all looked at the suits in awe. Each armour plate seemed perfectly brandished and polished. The grey color was often broken into green and blue, to represent Endridge. This was the same armour they had seen the other guards wear some time ago.

“Okay, let’s suit up. Once we’re in the armour, no one will know or care about who we are. We can perfectly blend in,” whispered Akuldra over to the children.

They started taking down the armour and lacing it over their own bodies. It was quite lightweight but was strong as well. Unfortunately, while they were in the middle of this, one of the guards suddenly walked up to them. “Hey! Who are you four?”

Akuldra lightly pushed the kids back as the other three guards approached them as well. “Okay, let’s do this.” He quickly rushed over to the guards, who immediately covered back. Akuldra pulled back his punch, confused. These were supposed to be royally trained guards. The elite of the knights. Why were they shying from the fight?

The children approached the guards as well, who were saying now, “Wait! Please don’t hurt us! We’re not gonna tell anyone just leave us alone.”

“What are you doing? Get up. I’m intruding into your king’s castle. Aren’t you supposed to try and stop me.” He put his hands to his side and waited for them to get up.

“I mean... we haven’t faced a threat in a long time. We’re not even trained to fight.” Akuldra’s eyes widened as he realised what the situation was. The guards were useless because the kingdom had the wizard. He protected the borders meaning no one would try to get into the castle. At least no one had been as desperate as them. The guards were nothing but a show to make sure no one acted up.

Akuldra smiled looking down at them. “Is there anyone that is trained?” The other guard behind him responded this time saying, “Well may be the military, so... so should probably leave now because they will come. Please... ." He stepped back slowly, trying to avoid eye contact with Akuldra. Was this some kind of joke?

Akuldra rolled his eyes and walked out of the room making his way through the halls without any precautions. “Hey wait up!” said Bella as the three children caught up to him. “What’re you doing? What if someone sees us?”

“Didn’t you hear what he just said? Even if they see us, what are they going to do? The guards have no training. This is going to be a lot easier than I thought.” Akuldra had a slight smile on his face. All this sneaking around really wasn’t for him. He liked things straightforward and that’s exactly what he was getting now.

“Akuldra this is Endridge castle. This is probably the most secure location in the entire continent. Just because three guards were inexperienced doesn’t mean the rest are too. I swear, we’re all gonna end up dead before we even meet the king.” Curmo was very reluctant and uncomfortable walking through the halls now. They were getting dirty looks from all the guests in the halls now. And it made sense, seeing the way they were dressed and the way they smelled.

“Don’t question me boy. I guessed this was all just for show when we got to the castle itself. The way they were standing guard and all. It’s more obvious to me. These idiots just confirmed it for me.” They had gotten to the staircase without anyone seeing them.

Whoever they crossed, Bella gave a warm smile to, as if awkwardly trying to apologize for their demeanor in this situation. Curmo on the other hand avoided all interactions. He kept his eyes straight forward, waiting for a full battalion of guards to turn the corner at any moment. Felix’s head was nervously swinging back and forth. Instead of looking at the guards or beautifully dressed guests, he was looking at the beautiful architecture of the inside of the castle. There were not many people like him that got to see the inside of Endridge castle in their lifetime.

As the party was making their way up the staircase, however, they noticed a lot more people on the second floor. There was a large dining hall and the guests seemed to have recently finished arriving. They were either sitting at the giant table at the center of the room or walking around the room. Each person had their own unique set of clothing that set them apart from the rest of the room. There was almost an annoying aroma that arose from all the perfume in the room. The floor of the room seemed to be made out of gold itself, but it wouldn't be a shock if it actually was. Curmo and Akuldra walked in stride confidently into the room, while Felix and Bella shyly strayed behind. This was one of the most awkward situations they had ever been in.

As soon as they entered the room, all eyes turned towards them. The sound of chattering stopped and was instead replaced with a low murmur. Who were these people? They were drenched in water and gave off this horrendous smell. Their noses wrinkled up as they gave the intruders a dirty look.

There were also guards surrounding them. Not a single one of them was equipped with any weaponry. They were all fumbling now, not sure what to do. They had never encountered a situation like this before, they had never needed to.

Akuldra now raised a hand to quiet everyone down, which worked immediately. All the murmuring stopped. "Hello there. My name is - well that doesn't matter. Do you know where I can find the king?"

Not a single person responded. They were aghast at how rude this man was being, and maybe also a little scared. Why weren't the guards doing anything? Why were they still allowing this man to speak? Looking over at them, Akuldra could see the uncomfortable shuffling. Some

were contemplating as to whether or not they should approach Akuldra, but they all decided against it in the end.

“No? Ok, let’s try this then.” Akuldra grabbed hold of a man standing a bit too close to them. He gave a small yelp as Akuldra grabbed his arm and tugged him towards himself. He then put the man in a choke hold with his left arm. The other gasped and slowly shuffled back. They couldn’t leave if they wanted to. Akuldra was blocking the staircase and the only other way down would be through those doors on either side of them, which seemed to be locked at the moment. “Tell me where the king is, or this man is going to sleep for a few hours.” he was frantically clawing at Akuldra’s arm, which wouldn’t budge.

“Akuldra are you sure this is such a good idea?” Bella whispered over to him as she looked from the man to the rest of the crowd. She was getting nervous they would get attacked, but Akuldra seemed confident that they wouldn’t. “Look at these people lass, do you really think they’re going to do anything to us,” he whispered in a low breath. “And then the guards. All… eleven of them look like they’re about to wet themselves.”

“Let him go!” said one of the guests from all the way in the back. Akuldra rolled his eyes again. Why was he having to repeat himself? “Sure, tell me where the king is and I’ll do just that.” The man was constantly trying to break free through all this. His eyes were darting around the room to catch anyone’s eyes, but no one looked directly at him. He was trying to speak.

“Not now my good sir,” said Akuldra without even looking down at the man. “I can’t let you go until I talk to the king. My god, do you all hate this man? I’ll hurt him. And I know none of you doubt me on that.”



“Well sir,” said one of the ‘guards’ stepping forward timidly, cautious of each step he took towards this giant man. “You see that man you’re holding there? That actually is king Locke.” Akuldra raised his eyebrows at the man, who was vigorously nodding, trying to get Akuldra’s arm off of him.

Felix’s eyes widened. This man was the king? He had never seen anyone from the royal family before, except the wizard. Akuldra immediately let the man go, who started coughing as he fell to his knees. About five of the guests approached him on the ground. Akuldra himself was shocked as he looked towards the man he had held hostage. As the king got up and started at the strange party, the three children bowed down to him. Akuldra, on the other hand, just stood there, staring at the king. What luck. The first person he finds just happens to be him.

“Well it's nice to meet you, your majesty,” he said, staring down at the king, who in turn just glared up at him. Who did this man think he was walking into the room like that? “I have some important information for you sir,” said Akuldra as he reached out a hand to help the king up, which he refused.

“What makes you think I’m still going to talk to you...” his voice trailed off as king Locke noticed Akuldra’s eyes. He blinked a few times before standing up and turning to the rest of the crowd. “I am so sorry to all the guests here today, but I will need to end this party short today. If you could all just make your way to the door to your left, you will be guided out of the castle. Thank you for joining us.”

The giant double doors were opened and the guests were ushered out of the room, which they seemed more or less grateful for. No one looked back as they all quickly exited the room.

The only ones left was the king, an older woman, two girls, and a boy. Most probably the royal family.

Peeking from behind Akuldra's large body, Felix got his first proper look at the king. He was a lot more ordinary looking than Felix had previously imagined. The king had curly brown hair which his son seemed to have gotten from him. His face was as pale as a full moon. The king wasn't a large man and he most certainly didn't match Akuldra's composure. He approached the strange party, still with caution, but with more curiosity.

"Please take a seat here," he said, pointing over to the large dining room table. Akuldra nodded in agreement as he made his way over to the table. "And you as well," he said, gesturing to Curmo, Bella, and Felix. They all followed Akuldra, looking over the royal family. Each one of them was wearing the finest clothing and jewelry money could buy, though Curmo doubted they had paid for anything they owned. Besides the king, the others were looking towards them with a slight hatred and disgust.

"Father, why are you inviting these intruders into our home?" exclaimed one of the daughters, most likely the older one. She, unlike her father, had straight, blonde hair like her mother. She carried herself with confidence and pride as she walked across the room towards her father.

"That's because these are no ordinary intruders. Tell me good sir, are you from Folsele?" he asked Akuldra, much to Akuldra's and everyone else's surprise. "Ya I am. How did you know?" The king smiled at him, thinking he knew exactly who the man was. "Your name must be Viri then?"

Curmo looked over at him confused as Felix and Bella shared their own look of puzzlement. Viri? Where did he get that name from? Akuldra's mouth opened slightly as he was for the first time speechless. He stared at the king who was looking back at him with hopeful eyes. Akuldra's eyes began to tear up just slightly as he could feel a lump in his throat.

"Did you know him?" asked Akuldra. King Locke's face dropped immediately, realising what the situation was. "How did it happen?" he asked Akuldra, in a more serious tone. "In the forest outside Folsele. That's why I'm here actually."

"Okay," said Curmo, standing up now. "What the hell is happening?" He looked from between the king and Akuldra who were silent now. "Viri was my father," said Akuldra, responding to Curmo's question. "Just about a fortnight ago, we were ambushed by the northern kingdoms. It all happened so fast we were barely able to attack. Fire rained from the sky. Giant balls of rock demolished every house and street. I saw my people dying in front of me. I saw people that I was supposed to protect pleading for help.

"They have a wizard. Maybe not as powerful as yours, but a wizard nonetheless. He is able to control the minds of the monsters and beasts as well. They were slaughtering out people, ripping them apart limb by limb. I was barely able to make it out alive. I wouldn't have anyway if it weren't for my father. He died so that we could get you this."

With that, Akuldra pulled out the battle plans and laid them out on the table. They were still slightly wet damp and the water made a little pool on the table. Without even looking at the map, the king put his hands on Akuldra's shoulders and brought him in for a hug.

Akuldra looked over at the king confused. Looking back at Akuldra with tears in his own eyes, Locke said now, "Did you ever wonder why you were in Folsele your whole life, why you

and your father had spent your life fighting off these monsters?" Akuldra shook his head. What did this king know? How did he know his father? "Your father was Endridgean, and so are you."

Time itself seemed to stop. "Welcome back Akuldra" Upon hearing his name, Akuldra looked up.

"Father, you know this man?" said Locke's son. The king nodded without even turning back, his eyes locked on Akuldra. He hadn't seen the boy since he was just a baby. Since the war.

"I know you have many questions, but I reckon you must be exhausted from your travels. I can take you to your rooms - ." At that point a guard burst into the room. His face was sweaty from running all the way up here. "Your majesty, there is someone trying to steal the royal crown! They've locked themselves in your room across the hall right now."

Curmo slapped his face remembering Treva and Mites. King Locke stood up and quickly rushed to the door. "Wait!" cried Curmo as he followed the king out. "Those are our friends." He looked at Curmo confused. "Well not really friends but I'll talk to them." Bella and Felix rushed outside after Curmo as well. Akuldra was still stuck to his seat, too shocked to even move.

The king nodded before leading the way to his room. The hallways were wide and stretched out like a bridge. Curmo couldn't help but notice, though, that there was nothing holding it up. This must have been one of the wizard's tricks as well.

As they approached the door, they could hear Treva and Mites scrambling in there, trying to get everything they could hold in their hands. Curmo knocked on the door. "Treva! Mites! Just come outside. Everything is good here. Nothing will happen to you!" Locke raised an

eyebrow at Curmo, but let him continue speaking. “It’s safe now. Just come outside.” The sound inside the room stopped.

Slowly but surely, two dirty heads popped out from behind the door. Mites and Treva sheepishly walked out to face the king, who was glaring down at them. “Hey there Mr. King sir.” said Treva, awkwardly attempting a bow. Mites was staring at the king wide eyed. “Your majesty I can explain - ” The king put up a hand to stop him. “It’s alright. You don’t need to explain yourselves. I’ll lead you to your rooms and you all can rest up there.” Treva and Mites both whipped their heads towards each other in complete bewilderment. They had been let off so easy.

“It’s nice to see you again guys,” said Curmo, smiling over at the thieves. Mites smiled back at him, patting Curmo on the shoulder. “You too pal... is he here?” said Treva trying to peek over Curmo’s shoulder until she spotted Felix. The moment she did, Felix gave a meager wave and her face lit up.

“I can arrange a large room for your party,” Locke said to a weary Akuldra who had walked out into the hall just then. He nodded. Locke went up to Akuldra and met eyes with him. “I promise you. All your questions will soon be answered. Tomorrow I can arrange for you to meet the wizard. And until then, I’ll have my generals take a look at the battle plans.” He turned now over to the guards that were lined up along the hall. They all were more uncomfortable then they never had been before. The only difficulty they had ever dealt with before was a rude guest.

“I need everyone to report to the battle yard and begin training first thing tomorrow. We will count numbers and distribute weapons tomorrow. There is another war coming. It is now

time to uphold the legacy of our fathers.” He nodded towards his men, who started marching downstairs in uneven lines, nearly tripping over each other.

Locke now smiled over at the party. “Your mission is now complete. The six of you are safe. I will guide you to your rooms now, and you can rest.” Akuldra managed a smile as he realized his mission was over. From his father’s tragic death in Folsele, to his near death experience, to nearly getting his head chopped off by an expert swordsman. These past days had been exhausting, more than usual for a knight.

They were led up a series of stairs directly across the giant room to a small hallway. There were only three rooms, each with two large beds. Without a moment of hesitation, Treva rushed into the room all the way at the end. The tables here were lined with food to last days. Mites followed her in. “Well good night to you all then.” He smiled and ran into the room himself, stuffing his face with pastries and fancy looking wedges of cheese.

“Alright then, me and Curmo can share a room.” Bella made her way to the room as Curmo nodded waving goodbye to his friends before following his friend in. Felix’s gaze lingered one last time as Bella closed the door behind her.

“Let’s go boy,” said Akuldra as he made his own way into the room on the left. The room was a lot bigger than what it looked like from outside. There was a large seating area directly as you walked in. The couches had beautiful carvings into them and were lined with soft, velvet coats. On the two sides of this area were the two beds. They both had thin and wide curtains covering them. Each looked as if five others could fit on them. A wide collection of pillows were placed on both. In the middle of the room, there was a door leading outside, which was getting mostly dark now. From it, you could quite clearly see the beautiful waterfall.

As Felix stepped out to get a good look before going off to bed, he could feel the mist from the water on his face. He sighed. Just a day ago he was hard at work in some field in the middle of nowhere. Now, he was sleeping in the royal house of Endridge. Oh how things had taken a turn. Looking over the horizon, Felix was thinking about his father. He was probably out there somewhere. With this thought, he walked back into the house, feeling a slight pang of guilt for having ditched his father. But this was okay. He was living his own life now. Once inside, he saw that Akuldra was fast asleep, snoring loudly as well. Felix smiled. He had been awake for over a day now himself, it was time to get some rest. As he lay his head down on the pillows, feeling the billowing white sheet against his bare arm, no thoughts came to mind. Only the peaceful bliss of rest.

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In Treva's room, Treva was jumping up and down on her bed, practically bouncing off the walls. Next to her lay empty plates and baskets from the food, but nothing compared to the pile surrounding Mites. They hadn't eaten like this in... well ever. Scrapping for food on the streets was a tough life. But now, Mites groaned, hating himself for eating as much as he did.

"I'm so full," he managed to say, lying on the ground. "But that was the most amazing thing I've ever done."

"We're living the good life now my brother," exclaimed Treva as she landed flat on her back, taking in everything around her. It was all so fancy. There were these beautiful ribbons and patterns lining the ceiling. There was a nice set of couches at the center of the room. This room

could hold two sets of all her brothers and sisters. It was hard to believe the room was meant for two people.

“I can’t believe the king actually let us into a room after we were going to rob him blind. I mean why?” said Treva, thinking back to her interaction with the king. He seemed to be passive and calm. In fact, she could hardly believe he was the king, not that anyone had seen him in a while.

“I mean, we were planning to rob him. Those four came here with information on the northern kingdoms. Saving Endridge from impending doom might be a good reason to let us stay a night longer, especially since we helped them.” Mites himself was thinking back to their awkward interaction. “Besides, who knows what the king is supposed to act like. It’s not like he makes many appearances. I barely know his name.”

Treva nodded. It had been common talk amongst the folk of Endridge. The king held all these fancy parties and functions, but never introduced himself to the common people. It didn’t make any sense. Wasn’t that supposed to be his job?

“Anyway, I’m beat. I reckon you should sleep too. And don’t touch another morsel or you’ll burst.” With this last statement, Treva turned over in bed and extinguished the flame, drowning the two of them in the darkness of night.

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Curmo kept tossing and turning in bed, not feeling very comfortable. It was dark in the room, and he was trying to sleep, but something was keeping him up. “Curmo can you keep it down,” said Bella lazily as she herself was having trouble dozing off.

“I can’t sleep. I can’t explain it but there’s something wrong.” Bella sighed as she sat up, relighting the flame on her nightstand. Curmo himself stood up. “What’s wrong,” asked Bella. She could clearly see the distraught on Curmo’s face.

“I keep thinking back to Belveyon. I mean, was it right to leave everyone behind? I just can’t help but feeling guilty for ditching while the rest of them there are living in a monster infested town. And there’s also Zenvor. I mean the poor thing could barely fly us to Endridge before we crashed. And not that lunatic woman is after her.”

Bella nodded, blinking a few times, trying to take in everything Curmo has just told her. She also felt the guilt for leaving her family. “Curmo you have to realize that if we stayed there, we’re no use to anyone. I mean, what are we going to do to help if we can’t even leave our homes? Over here, we have a chance to help. The truth is, none of this is going to stop until the northern kingdoms retreat. They’re the ones that are using the wizard’s magic. Besides you still have a lot to learn about your magic. And what better place than the magical kingdom itself.”

Curmo nodded towards her. Of course she was right. “But I know what you mean. Even though I try to reason with this and convince myself, I still feel scared for my parents. What they must be going through. At least they know where I am. And don’t worry about Zenvor, I’m sure Malarkey will take good care of her.”

Curmo smiled a little now, thinking back to the jolly tavern owner. His magic was powerful. He got Zenvor off the ground in a second without hesitating. Curmo still couldn't help but think about what Malarkery had said to him when he had tried to control his powers. Yer no average Purter boy. What did he mean? There was something different about Curmo, something special. The deviant had known it when he first met Curmo. Malarkey had known it. There was only one person that could give him the answer though. He needed to visit the Wizard of Endridge.

"Are you feeling better now?" asked Bella. Curmo's face seemed to have relaxed a bit. He most certainly was feeling better than before. Curmo nodded. "I think so. I'm really glad you came Bella. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't."

"Probably died." This resulted in a pillow being chucked at her head. Both the friends laughed for a moment, going back to the way they used to act in Beveyon. But the truth was, nothing would ever be the same for them ever again. "You know Curmo, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be here right now. Akuldra would never have chosen just me to travel with."

"And you're welcome," said Curmo. Bella rolled her eyes. "I mean it. I know it's dangerous and we keep getting attacked, but we're at Endridge castle now. We're at Endridge castle! If you had told me that at the beginning of this week, I probably would've sent you over to the doctor. But this is amazing. We're seeing things many people will never get to in their whole lives. Take it all in."

Curmo looked around the room, realizing the honor of his hospitality in the castle. It was something of great renown. "Anyway," said Bella, "you should get some sleep now. I'll see you

in the morning.” She extinguished the candle and Curmo lay his head back, feeling suddenly tired and more relaxed as his mind drifted off. Everything was going to be okay.

## **CHAPTER 10: The Apex Contingency**

The bird cut across the sky with delicate precision. It was one of the fastest eagles to ever take flight. On its back was a royal emblem of blue and green. The majestic animal had its wings spread as wide as a human body. It was covered in dark blue feathers except for its white belly. The eagle had talons as wide as knives. It started with a deadly gaze as it barreled through every cloud, zipping by so fast you would miss it if you blinked.

As the bird cleared one final cloud, it could see a wave of red beneath it. There was something terrible happening down there. This color usually meant fire. As she neared the campsite below, it was apparent that it was a fire, a constantly burning fire that sent plumes of black smoke into the sky. The world itself was locked into a battle with this monstrosity. A rain steadily thudded against the bird’s wings and onto the forest, but the eagle knew it couldn’t last for long. This flame was unnatural. It would win. It was already beginning to. Trees as black as charcoal were falling to the ground. It wasn’t long before it was all over, and the Earth had lost its land.

It landed on a perch, far away from the fire, for obvious reasons, before looking around. It was looking for a man, a man with a mask on his face. She had done this many times before. It was always the same journey. From the castle to the man, and back to the castle from the man.

There were others shuffling about down below, moving equipment and readying their weaponry. At the coast of this land were large ships, all heavily armed. There was a whole army

here, ready for war. Large battalions were standing at the ready at the edge of the forest, they didn't flinch even for a second when the burnt trees fell in front of them.

The eagle then saw him, the one with the white hair and mask, sitting on a large throne. Though the rain was constant, he didn't step inside. Instead, the man sat in the rain, staring directly at his wall of flames. The throne itself was made of the same woods that had died in the forest. This was an unforgiving person, the bird could tell. It made its way down to him, screeching loudly to make its approach known.

The man held out his arm for the bird to land on and it perched there for a second turning around. She knew the drill. Let the man take the parchment, and if he gave one back, carry it over to his owner back at the castle. It was about a day's journey for it. There was no other creature in the world that could make distance like she did, but the royal eagles were meant to fly fast.

"That's a good girl," said the man as he unwrapped the paper from the bird. There was a hint of loneliness in his voice, something maybe the other humans wouldn't have noticed. He sounded almost sad even as he tried to maintain this persona of fear. Before he even read the paper, the man fed the bird. This was always appreciated. The creature sat idly, chewing up the meat of the fish. She had it pretty good. Her job was simply going from one place to another, and she didn't have to worry about hunting either.

The man suddenly stood up in anger, his eyes wide with fury. The eagle could tell she didn't want to be around when the man got angry. He seemed scary, even to a bird as powerful as herself. Picking up the rest of the food in her mouth, the eagle flew off.

“Mortek! Get over here right now!” said the man, slightly raising his voice, making the two guards standing by his throne flinch. He was never one to get angry, so even when something slightly irked or irritated him, it meant he was furious.

The general stepped in bounds, quickly making his way over to the chancellor. He looked confusedly as he approached, saying, “Yes, your majesty? What seems to be the problem.”

“Mortek, I don’t know what to tell you. I try to keep faith in my people. I don’t ask much but that you follow your post and listen to me. Look at what little Virago’s gotten herself into now.” he handed the piece of paper over to the general.

He read over it, more confused now than he was before. “But this doesn’t mention Virago at all. It just says some deviant made into Endridge castle and... oh.” The realization suddenly hit him. It had been Viago’s job to make sure the deviant never got to Endridge. She was supposed to kill him, but she failed.

“Before you say anything, how can we even trust this information? And maybe it wasn’t Virago’s fault at all.” Mortek was trying to keep the chancellor calm and keep him from making any rash decision. He knew exactly how Gylbard got when something didn’t go his way.

“I know you cared about your friend Mortek. I did too. But there’s nothing more that can be done to help her, you know that.” Mortek nodded slightly. The chancellor was going to send out the order no matter what, there was nothing Mortek could say or do to help her.

“Send out the order Mortek, send a battalion after her. Send them out as soon as this rain stops. I want her head brought back to me.” Mortek grimly sighed, but responded, “Yes sire,” as he rushed over to one of the battalions and informed them of their duties, before returning back

to Gylbard. “It has been done, sire. They know what to do once the forest is burned. Is there anything else your majesty?”

The chancellor sighed looking over towards a tent to the far left of the camp. “Lets go pay our friend a little visit.” They made their way across the camp. Guards were readying the cannons and horses which had arrived on the most recent ships. This was good. Slowly but surely, all their materials were arriving. It wouldn’t be long before they were ready to leave. The council was sitting inside the tent to their right, with servants constant rushing in and out. They were laughing and cheering, which made Gylbard shake his head.

“Fools, every last one of them. The only reason I even have them here is for their troops. Once they all arrive, I might as well just finish them off, and they have no idea.” The chancellor chuckled at their idiocy. Mortek nodded, grimly thinking about the fate of his friend yet. He had known Virago after Gylbard, but was still close to her. They had fought together in the war with Maluva and the Viserwen uprising. She was a good soldier, but apparently expendable according to the chancellor.

They entered the small blue tent and the sound of the rain droned slightly lower behind them. Sitting cross legged on the floor was a muscular shirtless man. His eyes were closed and he was meditating. Although, his face scrunched up slightly in disgust at the neterence of the chancellor. He opened his eyes and looked at him.

“How are you my friend. Comfortable, I hope. You know I don’t want to have to hurt you. If you just listen to me, nothing will go wrong. You see, you have everything you could need. I have you a tent, food, water, safety, and anything else you may require. As long as you obey me, you can live just like this.”

He was glaring up at Gylbard now, angrier than he had ever felt before. This was the man that had ruined the sacred Folsele forest. He was burning it to the ground and the earth itself was weeping. This man in front of him was the cause of everything, but Aelnoq knew there was nothing he could do to help, nothing he could do to stop the chancellor.

“So... why are you here. Is there another village you want destroyed?” asked Aelnoq sarcastically as he stood up, towering over Gylbard and matching height with Mortek. The general stepped forward slightly, thinking the wizard was threatening Gylbard, before the chancellor placed a hand out in front of him.

“It’s alright Mortek, there is nothing he can do. I have nothing to fear from this man.” He walked around the tent, looking over the overturned furniture and half burned pieces of wood. “You know killing yourself isn’t going to work Aelnoq. There’s nothing you can do for that. Honestly you might as well just give in.”

Aelnoq looked back at the chancellor, his confident strides across the room even the knowledge that everything was going to fall apart. How was he like this. How could he keep that look in his eyes when there was so much chaos and hate around him.

“The woods are dying Aelnoq. Thanks to you, we’re going to be out of here soon enough. But unfortunately, we’ll have to change our course of action. The deviant made it to Endridge.” This caught Aelnoq’s attention immediately. The deviant had made it to Endridge. That meant forces were probably coming soon. It wouldn’t be long before they were upon them, and all the reinforcements from the northern continents hadn’t even arrived in Folsele yet. Although, he could feel the Earth giving way. She wouldn’t be able to hold back any longer.

“No, we’re instead going to be making our way to the third wizard to kill him.” He looked over at Aelnoq, watching him scow. “According to you, he is the only person left in the way between me and victory. And though I don’t want to believe in such ridiculous theories, I know you cannot lie, so I must make my way over to him myself to secure my victory. Once the forest is completely burned, we can advance into the continent. So I just need one thing from you. Where is the third wizard Aelnoq.”

The room became silent. The only sound that could be heard was of the rain battering down outside. Aelnoq nodded, looking back at the chancellor. “Why did you wait?”

“I’m sorry?” said Gylbard, looking confused towards Aelnoq. “Why did you wait to ask me? You knew about the wizard ever since I told you yesterday, but you waited to ask me about him until now. Why?” This was the most Aelnoq had spoke in a long time.

“I’m glad you’re so observant, my ancient friend. Remember what you had said to me then? You had said destiny arrives sooner to those who try to evade it. According to that, no matter what decision I made, I was to lose. But that is the apex contingency is it not? The unpredictability of the future can only be defined by what we do now. I simply had to be sure that I wanted to go after wizard *before* going off to Endridge. And now I am sure. I have just received some troubling news, to which I know that killing your brother is the only way to go. I will not try to evade destiny then, I will meet it. I will kill the wizard myself. If there is anyone that can defeat destiny then it shall be me. Besides, I can see the nervousness in your eyes. You know the truth as well as I do.”

Aelnoq tried to avert his gaze now, blinking rapidly. What the hell? How did he know? Gylbard made his way over to the wizard. Aelnoq could feel his smile. He was pleased with



himself. “How long have you known?” asked the wizard. Mortek was looking from between the two of them, with no idea what was going on.

“I didn’t. I had only but a guess. You didn’t tell me yourself so it meant you were hiding it. And I could sense your fear. You couldn’t even revel in the light of your own prophecy, because it’s shadow was too dark. But now you’ve told me yourself. Not very smart for a sacred creature of the Earth herself. ”

“Umm... sir, might I know what the hell is going on?” Mortek asked with confusion and distress. “Our friend here has disregarded to tell us something quite important. The wizard will not be able to stop me because I shall kill him.” Aelnoq grinded his teeth. The truth had finally come out.

“But sire,” said Mortek. “I though the wizard said -”

“Yes I know what he said. I barely understand this myself, so I don’t expect you to, with your feeble mind to.” Mortek nodded, glad the chancellor was being so understanding. “That is the confusion itself. This son of Earth is supposed to defeat me, but I will be the one killing him. It makes no sense but perfect sense at the same time. The future, for maybe the first time, is completely unpredictable. There is no saying who's going to win or lose. From my intuition, I learned that Aelnoq was unsure, even about the truth. That’s because it doesn’t even exist.”

The wizard knew this was true. There was no way to tell which outcome of the future was going to happen. His vision of the future was now as blurry as a human’s. This war was going to get very ugly. One of the guards suddenly burst into the tent.

“How many times have I told you to announce yourself before entering,” said Gylbard in an agitated tone. The guard had his hands on his knees and was panting. Sweat dripped from his

brow onto the thirsty sandy floor. “Sir you’ll want to see this,” the guard said between breaths, pointing to outside the tent.

Gylbard sighed getting up, and motioned his fingers behind his for the wizard and Mortek to follow. Stepping outside, they were greeted with a large crowd of soldiers watching towards the sea. The royal from the northern kingdoms were also there, being carried on their chairs to get a better view of what was coming.

Once they saw Gylbard, all attention immediately diverted to him. “Ah good sir, you’ll want to see this,” said the king of Meertrov, glad that his promise was not in vain. The last thing he wanted to do, especially after seeing the slaughter of Folsele, was disappoint Gylbard.

Looking over towards the sea, it became apparent what everybody was excited about. In the distance about 50 giant ships could be seen making their ways over to the western continent’s border. A servant brought over a pair of binoculars for Gylbard, and looking through them, could see the ships more clearly. They were the forces that were supposed to be coming in a few days from now. They were ahead of schedule. This was good. The chancellor had a sparkle in his eyes. Everything was going according to plan.

Each ship was heavily lined with armour, they had spent the past three years building them. On the ships, Gylbard could see soldiers from each of the five large kingdoms of the northern continent. There were also large metal crates, barred up monsters, waiting to be brought onto land. There were probably a lot more underneath. These monsters were not hard to find in the northern kingdom, but were often dangerous to be around. If it weren’t for Aelnoq, Gylbard wouldn’t have dared proceeded with his plans, but there was reassurance in knowing they had these creatures on their sides.

“I am quite pleased with you good sir,” Gylbard said to the king of Meertrov who was practically gleaming. He might still be useful yet to the chancellor. “Sir,” said Mortek. “Do you want to start convening a new plan? If the deviant has made it over to Endridge, they know we’re coming and they’ll be ready for us. We should start planning a secondary course of action, especially since the troops have arrived.”

Gylbard nodded, motioning to the large tent directly at the center of the burned down village. “Let’s go. Bring the wizard with you, and your own council if you require it.”

Mortek nodded over to two other men, who looked very similar in size and composure, and the wizard who begrudgingly trudged along the path to the tent. The five entered the room. It was a smaller one than any of the living spaces, but still quite large. Directed at the center of the room was a large wooden table. On it was a map of the western continent with pieces laid out across it. Before the chancellor could get too close, Mortek quickly removed the piece representing Virago. The less they talked about her now, the better. But Mortek was slightly disappointed. He had liked Virago. She was the only fun one of this lot.

“Before we begin, I’d like to introduce you to my right hand men. They are my most trusted soldiers in camp. To the right that’s Primi and next to him is his brother Unus. They’re twins.” Both of them immediately placed a hand over their armor plate and bowed down in front of the chancellor.

“Hmm... I like these two,” he said, giving a slight laugh. “I assume they will both be taking separate battalions. In addition, these two are also strategically inclined and can assist in mapping out our new plans.” Gylbard nodded, quite pleased with the introduction. Both of the brothers did indeed look exactly the same. The only way you could tell the difference was with

the letter they had imprinted on the front of their armor plates. One had a capital P and the other had a capital U.

Now, turning his attention back over to the map, Gylbard asked his general, “What is our play going to be? We can no longer charge into battle.”

Mortek nodded, reorganizing the pieces on the board and calling over the two brothers. Gylbard sat down for a moment, looking over at the wizard, who was standing at the back end of the tent, trying to catch a glimpse of the oncoming forces.

“You should rest for awhile Aelnoq. I don’t want you to work yourself to death, yet,” said Gylbard slyly as the wizard sat on the ground and closed his eyes again, his back still turned to the chancellor. “You know something my friend. I feel as though you have an image on me imprinted in your head and I want to clear up any confusion with you. Look at me.”

Aelnoq turned his head to face the other direction, meeting eyes with Gylbard who now removed his hood to allow more locks of white hair to fall over his face. Gylbard’s eyes were cold and precise. The dark blue promising to tear down anything that stood in its path. On the other side were Aelnoq’s deep brown eyes, so murky you could barely see them. They burned with the flame of savegy and pure, uncontainable power. His straight, wet black hair fell messily to almost cover his eyes, as if he were peeking behind a curtain. Both of the men were confident, felt strength, but only one was stronger, and neither could decide who.

“I don’t want to do all this. I never grew up wanting to kill and conquer, but this isn’t really my choice. My father paved a road to follow and once I started, there was no turning back. I have a legacy to protect Aelnoq. If I don’t destroy Endridge, I’ll have failed my people. I’ll have failed myself.” He had said Aelnoq’s name. For the first time.

Aelnoq stared confusedly at the chancellor who tried to look away now. He had made a fatal error. He had let his true emotions out. The wizard now knew more about the chancellor than the chancellor knew about the wizard. Luckily, the other three kept on talking, they hadn't heard what Gylbard had said. They hadn't noticed his moment of weakness.

"Anyway, I just want you to know what this is. This isn't savagery. The Folseleans were a shame, I really thought they would have understood, but I guess not." Gylbrd stood up now, making his way over to the map while putting the hood back over his head.

"Your Majesty I think we have an idea," said Unus, stepping forward, his hands behind his back. "I think we can split off our battalion into two different groups. One composed of monsters, the other of humans." Gylbard nodded following along as the pieces were shuffled across the board.

Mortek joined in saying, "We can leave with the soldiers downwards and take control of the easter coast of the continent all the way down to Eslov. Once the trading posts are taken over, all the incoming shipments from Tenelia and Lyntra can be intercepted. We can send the battalions disguised as merchants down to Tenelia then, and take over the southside of the continent. When we start pushing forward from the west and south, Edridge will have no choice but to fight or retreat. The monsters can be sent westward towards Endridge and the other nations as soon as possible. The wizard will no longer be able to protect the people and they'll be weakened before we even begin the battle. Then, once we start advancing, Endridge will be too weak to fight back. This'll have to work."

Gylbard nodded, realizing and understanding the plan, but also knowing there would have to be one more addition. "You'll have to split up the soldiers into four different

battalions. Three move down towards Eslov and start to push westwards as well as they can. One will depart with me. I'm going to find the wizard before we invade Endridge. It's the only way I can know we've succeeded."

"But you don't even know where the third wizard is," said Mortek. "Even he doesn't know." The general pointed over to Aelnoq. They had tried and tried to get the information about the third wizard out of him. They had beat him, tried drowning him, and even threatened to spread the wildfire, but he didn't seem to know. But this much should have been expected. After all, he wasn't allowed to lie to the chancellor.

"That's not entirely true," said Gylbard as he made his way over to Aelnoq. "This is where our friend comes in. Wizard, I want you to place a seeker on the map." Aelnoq whipped his head in confusion towards Gylbard. How was it possible? How did he know? With every passing moment. Aelnoq was finding Gylbard to be more and more cunning, as well as dangerous. "I have my ways good wizard. Now please, get on with it," said Gylbard, almost as if he were reading Aelnoq's mind.

"You're very intelligent, I'll give you that," said Aelnoq as he gritted his teeth getting up and moving over to the map. Once there, he picked up a knife from the table and cut the tip of his finger, slightly, to draw out a single drop of blood. The red droplet fell onto the map, in the middle of the ocean, but didn't stay there. The droplet moved around the map, as if looking for something, or in this case, someone. It seemed to have a mind of its own. The paper didn't soak up the blood, not even for a second, before the little creature found its way over to an island, just off the southeastern coast of the nero crescent. Here, it found its way into the center of the island and sank into the paper, leaving behind a dark red blotch.

“What in the living hell was that?” asked Primi, saying what everyone else was thinking. “That my friends is the benefit of all powerful magic. This is a little trick Endridge used back in our fathers’ war to get the upper hand. If you’re looking for someone and you share a blood connection with them, you can find them on the map with a drop of blood. The third wizard is right there, wherever there is.”

Everyone looked down at the map, at the large island. It was on the map, but there was no information about it. The island had an outer ring and the center of it was marked with a question mark. “Where did you get this map Mortek?” asked Gylbard. “This one isn’t ours. I found it here in Folsele.” They all looked confusedly at the map. No one had been paying attention to this strange place when they were planning out the attacks. None of them had even seen this land mass in their maps back at home.

“What is this place?” asked Mortek, trying to flip over to his own drawings and plannings, only to realize that it really hadn’t ever been there before.

“This is no matter, we can still make our way over to the island and kill the wizard. It will only be a little more dangerous because we don’t know anything about this place.”

They all nodded silently, trying to think of a plan, but nothing came to mind. How could they ever approach any location safely if they didn’t even know it existed until this very moment? Besides, no one had ever seen the wizard, so they had no idea what danger they could be walking into.

“I know what you’re thinking, but don’t worry. I’ll be bringing him with me,” said Gylbard, pointing over to the wizard. Aelnoq was now fearful of the future. The prediction that he had seen crystal clear before had suddenly gotten blurry. The mere thought of the northern

continent winning was a scary one. Gyblard was unstable and cruel and vengeful. The contingency would exist though, whether he liked it or not. Nothing would allow a foreseeable destiny anymore. Nothing would ever be the same again.

“Alright boys, now let’s think about positions. I will be leading one of the squadrons over to this island,” said the chancellor, pointing to the blotch of blood on the page, right atop the question mark. “I want Mortek to take control of the Eslov market right here. There may be pirates so you'll have to be careful.” Mortek nodded, taking in the details and already planning out a battle scenario for if the pirates did ever show up.

“Right then. And you two,” Gylbard pointed to the twins. “take the next battalion over to Tenelia down below. Once you maintain a stronghold there, I want Primi to push towards Lyntra and eventually Enacreon. And that leaves one battalion remaining. If we want to take over the western continent, we’re going to need to push into Endridge from all sides. We’re going to need someone with war experience and someone willing to get their hands dirty. The push from the west is going to be the most difficult, so we’ll need someone ruthless.”

At this moment, a loud roar from the beaches could be heard. It was evident that the battleships had made land at Folsele. The forces had arrived. “Hold that thought,” said Gylbard as he stepped outside to greet the oncoming forces. The Viserwen guards were helping the ships dock, not a single one of the boats getting close to the floating fortress. As the men began to disembark, the whole of the beach loudened their cheers. It was deafening. Gylbard looked proudly as each soldier rushed out of their vessel onto the enemy land. It was all coming together so nicely.



The royals were being thrown in the air and greeted passionately by their citizens. They were laughing and cheering as their soldiers carried them on their chairs high in the sky. Battle ready men and women started scouring the land and getting ready for battle. It was at this point when Gylbard noticed a smaller ship approaching from a more southern point. It was coming in hot, barely showing promise of stopping at all, but it did, right before crashing onto the populated beaches. Gylbard saw the man that was standing on the smaller wooden boat, a heavy set man, with paint splattered across his body. He was sitting on the edge of the ship, evidently not afraid to fall off the height of the ship. There was a manic look in his eye and a wild grin on his face. Gylbard of course knew who he was, but was still pretty shocked. He didn't expect this man to show up, but he had.

The cheering quieted a little as those aboard this last ship disembarked. A small batch of no more than a thousand people rushed out of the boat, sniffing around the place and screaming louder than anyone else there. Their screams though, were savage, and unruly. Each one of the soldiers looked like the strange man. They were all covered in war paint. Some of their eyes were colored black while others had random blue stripes across their chests. Their clothing was mostly in rags that barely covered their bodies which emitted a foul odor. While the other soldiers were for the most part well enough groomed, these savages had mangy hair and practically rotten teeth. Each and every one of them were a horrid sight.

The cheering from the other soldiers had stopped now altogether as they saw this ship approach. It had been following them since they had left. The man atop the ship now stared directly at Gylbard, waiting for him to break gaze first, but he did no such thing. In fact, the chancellor narrowed his gaze, practically challenging him. The man laughed, jumping off the

side of the boat onto the sandy shore. This chancellor man was seemingly powerful, but the man would find out just how much.

Without faltering a step, he walked directly towards Gylbard, everyone around them separating, making way for their leader, for whom they also gave a slight bow. He walked with grace and confidence, something Gylbard despised in people that tried to approach him. It meant they didn't quite understand the kind of person he was, but he respected this man immediately. There was something different about him.

He approached Gylbard now, still holding his gaze and a smirk on his face. Gylbard smiled back, not that anyone could see it anyway.

"It's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance your highness," said Gylbard, easily maintaining his persona of staying calm and calculated. He didn't say anything, but it was obvious what he was thinking. How was this man in front of him not covering? The man shared a mutual respect for Gylbard at this moment.

The rest of the camp was silent as the man opened his mouth. "Not your highness. Yo call my name: Fero." A gasp erupted from the rest of the crowd as low murmurs began. It was obvious that this man seemed dangerous, but no one could tell just how much until now. He was Fero, leader of one of the few uncivilized societies left in the world.

His people lived in the woods in the northern kingdoms. The children of the north were told stories of the dangerous savages that lived in the wild. How they would come and steal you if you didn't finish your food. But these people were never really a myth. They hunted and killed large and wild animals by themselves. Gylbard himself would have to think multiple times before ever crossing Fero and his people. They had developed and evolved completely by

themselves in the forest. Each man or woman that stood with Fero had grown to be stronger and faster than the rest of them. If there was anyone that could come close to matching the ferocity of a deviant, it would be these people. If the Earth had created monsters to look like humans, it would be these people, if you could really call them that.

Gylbard's nose slightly wrinkled from the filthy smell of the man, whose grin had widened after hearing the roar of murmurs break out amongst the rest of the group. Gylbard respected and promoted the idea of perfection, cleanliness, and purity, but this man was walking in with his tribe of monkeys bringing chaos and disorder to their lands. Gylbard grinded his teeth, but showed good constraint of his frustration.

"I am quite pleased you showed up. I was worried that you had simply killed my delivery man when I had sent him to your woods. No other animal was willing to enter your lands I'm afraid." Gybard straightened his back trying to peek out slightly higher than the man, who was about the same height of Gylbard himself. Mortek now made his way over to Gylbard, nervous for the chancellor's safety, for good reason. Fero finally broke his gaze, giving a sideways look at Mortek. Gylbard smiled victoriously as Fero's friendly grin was now gone. Fero could tell who was in charge here, at least for the moment.

"We did kill," said the man, cocking his head to the side, trying to scare the chancellor, who didn't bat an eye. "We come anyway. You promise land."

"Yes, yes of course my ferocious friend. You will have all the land you require once Endridge is ours," said Gylbard, pointing his hand towards the tent with the battle plans. "Come, we have been waiting for someone to complete our battalion, and I think I have the perfect idea."

Fero looked back at his people, who awaited his command patiently. Fero nodded, raising his left hand and pumping his fist in the air, sounding out a loud screech. The others followed suit, howling like maniacs to the night sky.

Gylbard ushered over his guards saying, “make room for all of our new guests. Fill the tents with capacity and if we don’t have enough room the soldiers can stay in their ships.”

They all made their way over to the tent. Immediately, Fero started sniffing around, picking up the map and looking under it, he displaced some of the boat pieces, making them fall over the edge. “Hey, watch out for that!” said Primi as he pushed Fero aside, to which the savage leader immediately pinned Primi against a wall, a hand to his throat.

Mortek and Unus tried rushing over to their friend’s aid, but were stopped by Gylbard raising his hand. He was interested in watching, seeing what would happen. “Are you goddamn crazy!” screamed Primi, trying to regain his breath. “No touch Fero again.” Fero dropped his hand, allowing Unus to fall to the floor. He turned again and saw the wizard. Cocking his head he made his way over to Aelnoq.

Aelnoq straightened his back and took a menacing step forward. If this freak put a finger on him he would fry Fero to a crisp right where he stood. Right as they were about to meet, Gylbard cut right in front of Fero. “Oh no, that’s not a toy you want to play with right now. Let me show you what I was thinking for our plans.” He led Fero over to the map, and away from the wizard.

“Remember when I was saying we would need someone for the western flank,” said Gylbard, recalling their recent meeting. “I think we have our candidate.” He patted Fero on the

back. Everything was falling into place nicely. Gylbard was trying to think twenty steps ahead, visualizing any possible misstep that they might make.

“With all due respect, do you really think that’s a safe idea?” questioned Mortek, eyeing the strange man, who was kneeling now, staring intently at the pieces on the board. “Mortek, stop being so paranoid. We have been given an advantage we weren’t even expecting. We could be foolish to turn down the help of our friend here. They have willingly joined us in the fight. No one will be expecting them to join in, they’ll just be our secret weapon to winning this whole thing.” Mortek reluctantly nodded, knowing Gylbard was right. These people had no moral compass or compassion. They killed in cold blood and cared about nothing. If they had to send a battalion into the most heavily infested enemy land in their battle, it would be wise to recruit these men.

Gylbard laughed now, thinking back to the Aelnoq’s prediction. Destiny was siding with him completely. Everything was working out exactly the way it should. Suddenly, Gylbard’s ears perked up. “Wait, do you hear that?” The rest of them looked towards him confused. “No,” said Aelnoq, the words barely escaping his mouth as he realised what it was. “What is it?” asked Unus, as confused as the rest of them. Gylbard rushed outside, the rest of them following him.

The soldiers were still celebrating, large campfires were set up on the sandy shores, but the sound of the pattering rain on the tents had stopped. The rain had stopped! Gylbard looked over at his beautiful wall of flames that kept on burning brighter and brighter as more of the woods began to fall. It was happening, the Earth was giving way.

Aelnoq stood inside, as he let his knees fall to the ground. The Earth couldn’t fight anymore, she couldn’t keep dousing a flame that would never end. “It’s okay mother,” said

Aelnoq as he put a hand down to the grassy ground beneath him. “You can rest now. You did your best.” A tear escaped his eyes and fell to the ground as he felt the pain of the dying trees rip through his chest. This was barbaric, unnatural. The earth had sprouted every inch of the land herself. A beautiful creation was now dying so horribly, it was utmost unbearable.

The attention outside shifted from the campfire to the giant inferno which was now quickly spreading across the trees, ripping through canopies and torching every last grass blade till it was colored a rich black.

“I can’t believe it, we’re winning,” said Gylbard. He knew the woods would have to eventually give way but he didn’t know the rain was going to be this weak. This was going a lot more smoothly than he had expected. The frustration and anger that he felt from Fero’s presence was quickly transforming into pride for his work.

“Sir, if the flame keeps spreading the way it is now, we’ll have a clear path that departs by sundown tomorrow. We’ll be on our way a week ahead of time, leaving you plenty of time to deal with the third wizard,” said Mortek, calculating the spread of the fire by the black trees which fell to the ground.

Fero and his people showed no sign of pleasure from this though. Fero’s face was scrunched up in anger as he watched the trees burn. His people sat down on one knee, facing the fire with a hand over their hearts. Watching nature get destroyed was a horrible thing. It was even worse knowing you were with the man that caused it. A roar of appraisal came from the rest of the soldiers as they saw the rain giving way as well.

“This is wrong,” said Fero, looking directly at Gylbard. “You not beat nature.”

Gylbard cocked his head. “Oh come my friend, it’s a small price to pay for your land. I know that back at home you barely have any more woods left to stay in. Here, you’ll find acres and acres of it. What’s one forest as a sacrifice.”

Fero didn’t agree, but didn’t say anything. What was he supposed to say to a monster like this. Gylbard was the real savage.

“Well then, looks like we’re on course. Welcome to the battle my friend,” Gylbard batted Fero again on his back as he made his way into the tent. Fero walked over to his people solemnly.

“What now Fero?” asked one girl squatting with the rest. “We must stay. We must fight. We must win.” Fero looked over at the flame intently. The chancellor was right. Back in the northern continent, the woods had been diminishing and the winters were colder than ever before. If something was to change, it would have to be now. Fero hoped he had made the right decision because there was no turning back.

## **CHAPTER 11: Grand Wizard Pruden**

Felix opened his eyes, blinking several times to gain his focus. The sunlight streamed through the window creating a beautiful cristiline pattern on the floor. He sighed slightly as he stood up to get back to work on the farm, otherwise mother would have his head. Suddenly his eyes shot wide open as he jumped up, realizing where he was. The memories from the previous day’s encounter flooded his head. He was in Endridge castle! Looking around, he saw the room much more differently than he had the night before. The floor was covered in a beautiful stylistic pattern of wood. It seemed as if every single flower had been hand carved. His own bed frame

was surrounded by curtains, which had been pulled back and tied to the post unlike the night before.

Felix rubbed his eyes as he stood up. There was a soft white carpet which lay directly under the bed. He felt it's fuzzy warmth underneath his toes and the warm sunlight of the day on his face as he began to smile. He hadn't slept this well in a long time, especially in a bed this soft and warm. Making his way over the balcony, Felix looked over at the bed at the other end of the room. It had been neatly made and emptied. Akuldra was gone. Felix shrugged while opening the doors to see the outside world.

The thunderous roar of the waterfall filled his ears. Looking to the right, he saw the rapids he had almost been carried away by just the day before. The water looked practically white and sharp rocks jutted out of the water towards the start of the fall. Below, Felix could make out the outline of the great Endridge lake through the mist. They hadn't passed it on their way to the castle, but Felix had really wished they had. His father talked about the lake everytime he came back from his trips to Endridge. Of course, his mother wasn't likely to listen, but Felix would always dream of what it would be like to see it in person.

He looked over the horizon, at the large expanses of the world. His father was out there somewhere. Felix's eyes started to tear up thinking about where his father might be. He had left without even saying good-bye. When he came back to the Great Plains, he would be so worried. But this was good, he was safe and he knew it.

Besides the waterfall, the actual kingdom of Endridge was a spectacle in and of itself. Looking from higher above, Felix could see just how much there really was going on there. Every street led to at least a dozen smaller alleys which in turn led to even more streets. Houses



were piled up at every corner and almost seemed squashed together. Giant shadows were cast on the land by the large floating houses and shops from which the snake-link bridges stretched endlessly, probably looping back around the other side of the castle. Young children were running in the streets, merchants were busy trying to sell tomatoes and animal skin. The whole place was alive, as if a living entity living in harmony.

Felix sighed, he had finally made it here. His whole life his father had wanted him to see Endridge, to experience it's magic. Now he knew just what he was talking about. Not in a metaphoric sense either, there was literal magic in this place, probably from the wizard. The power was so immense it felt like a physical sensation, like when you step outside into the cold from a warm room. Looking up, he could swear the source was coming from right above him. The wizard was probably residing in the tower itself. It made Felix shudder just thinking about this.

As Felix stepped back into the room, the sounds of the laughing children and screaming merchants died behind him. He was now greeted with the question of how long he had been asleep. Akuldra had been gone and Endridge seemed as if it were fairly into the morning. Felix's stomach began to grumble, calling for his attention. NO matter what time it was, he needed to eat something soon.

Felix opened the heavy door and poked his head out awkwardly. There wasn't a single sound coming down the hall. Everything was completely silent and still. Were the others still sleeping? He knocked on both doors near him, where his friends had been sleeping the day before. No one responded. He then tiptoed through the passageway until it met with the larger hall.

The place was exactly how he had remembered it, but seemed different in its decoration. String of leaves hung in regular patterns around the room, no doubt to celebrate the coming of the spring. The seemingly floating candles from the previous day were gone. Long windows lined up the hall and let in light that lay across the floor in beautiful and colorful patterns. He could hear the birds chirping from outside the open windows. There were a lot more people now, maids and servants lining up the hallways cleaning and carrying trays of food. Some people in large gowns and fancy suits also walked towards a large hall at the far end of the hall on the left.

At this moment, one of the servants, the same man that had led them to their rooms the day before, rushed over to him upon seeing him awake. Felix gave a small smile and waved slightly. "Ah sir, you've woken. I hope your first night at Endridge castle was comfortable," he asked, giving a slight bow. "Oh you have no idea. Much better than what I'm used to." Felix recalled those nights back at home when he was forced to sleep outside, even in the rain.

"Well sir, the king has instructed me to direct you over the dining hall. The rest of your party is there right now." Oh boy, Felix thought, he was the last one. "Well, sure thanks... mister..." The man quickly chimed in, "Amica, sir." Felix nodded. "Thanks Amica."

They walked in silence through the halls. The beautiful paintings filled the walls and ceiling of the hall and Felix was staring around dumbfounded at how someone had managed to make all of this. Amica looked over at him sideways, smiling at the boy's fascination. Living in the castle, it was easy to forget just how majestic it really was.

"Quite a spectacle isn't it?" said Amica looking around himself. "I'll say. I can still barely believe it and I'm looking at it." Felix's mouth was slightly open as he tried to take in every image from the large ceiling above him, which occasionally broke off into a large circular

window. “It was built by the wizard himself, as a stronghold many years ago. Endridge was built as a place of peace and acceptance. Hard to maintain anything with so many people though. I guess that’s why his majesty stopped trying altogether.” Felix nodded recalling the previous day’s events. Walking into the kingdom, he had immediately noticed the immense population. In addition to that, when the crowd had found out that Akuldra was a deviant, they had started rioting immediately. The guards had never shown up, and things would’ve gotten a lot worse if they hadn’t managed to get out.

As they walked, the sound of laughing and talking filled the air. He could see it just around the corner. A dining hall, not different from the one he had seen all the rich people going to before. It was smaller though, much smaller, but no less fancy. Inside, Felix could see all his friends and three other children he had never met. At the two ends of the table the king and queen sat. There was an empty chair right next between Akuldra and Bella. Curmo sat on the other side of the table, next to the king as well, and lined up next to his were the three unknown kids. Sitting next to the queen, on the right hand side of the table were Mites and Treva, who were chatting it up.

All eyes turned to Felix as he entered the room. “Ah there you are!” said Bella excitedly as she motioned over to the seat next to herself. Curmo smiled at him too, waving over to him. Treva jumped out of her seat, making the queen flinch slightly. Akuldra gave him a firm nod which was enough coming out of him. He looked back at Amica. “Thank you Amica, I’ll see you around I hope,” he said, giving the man a friendly pat on the back. Amica laughed and gave a slight bow before leaving. He liked this boy.

Sitting down next to Bella, Felix looked at how much food there was on the table. Literal silver platters of meat, fish, grapes, and bread filled up the table. Akuldra's own plate had practically a mountain of food piled on it. He seemed to have taken everything there was.

"I'm glad you could join us before we left. Please, eat. I know you must be hungry from your travels," said the king. For the most part, it was hard to believe that he really was the king. The man looked so ordinary. Not like those confident images that Felix was used to seeing. He just seemed so... human. The queen too. She donned a long flowy dress made of velvet and silk. Her face was soft and welcoming. She had her hair tied up in a bunch on her head. Felix then turned his attention over to the other three children sitting across from him. There were three children in total, two girls and a boy. The girl sitting next to Curmo seemed to be the oldest, followed by the boy and then the third girl. From their appearance, it was obvious these were the royal children. They had on elegant dresses with corsets and the boy had on a large fur tunic. They were sitting up straight in their chair, peering over at their 'guests' with uninterested eyes, except for the youngest sister. She was probably the nice one.

"Like I was saying," continued the king. "Our father, and our father's father all believed in the amazing powers of the deviants. They were the generals of our armies during the wars of the past and they have led Endridge into glorious victory from time and time again. It would be my genuine honor to allow you to help us get our troops ready for battle." Akuldra smiled, imagining the trials he was going to put them through. "Unfortunately for us, none of our soldiers are ready for war. As you saw yesterday, even our own guards are horribly inexperienced. And can you blame them? Every problem the nation had ever faced, the wizard

had taken care of. But now, I believe we will need your help more than ever, especially if what you are telling us is the truth ”

“It is sire,” responded Akuldra, grimly now. “The attack on Folsele was from the hands of a wizard himself. I saw the wand.” The king nodded, thinking about the peril his nation was about to face. “Then it is imperative that you speak with our own sworn protector. The grand wizard... Pruden.”

The room slowly started to break off into two conversations. The king was speaking with Curmo, Akuldra and the two oldest siblings. The others were speaking with the queen. “You must tell me more about the streets of Endridge. Oh how I wish I could get out into the world more, but these walls confine me,” said the queen in a courteous tone. “Oh I got plenty of stories,” said Treva with a glint in her eye. Living on the streets was what her whole life had been about. Finally someone was appreciating her.

“Ya I’m sure you would, street rat,” chimed in the oldest daughter, breaking off into their conversation. “Excuse my daughter,” said the queen, glaring at her now. “She doesn’t know how to act when there’s company around. I don’t think you have been formally introduced to my children yet. The oldest there is my daughter, Sable. Next to her is my only son, Colin. And next to me is my younger daughter Venny.”

The two older ones continued to glare at the guests while Venny gave a wide smile and waved at them. She seemed younger than Treva, maybe around the age of ten. “It’s nice to make your acquaintance,” she said. Bella smiled back, “The pleasure is all ours.”

Suddenly, the king’s voice boomed across the room, “Then it’s decided!” He merrily said, beaming with excitement. “My only condition is,” said Akuldra, “I want him by my side.”

Akuldra pointed across the table over to Mites, who looked as confused as the rest of them. “Is he a deviant as well?” asked the king. “No, but I’ve seen the way he handles situations. You won’t find a better soldier than him in all of Endridge. Besides, I trust him, and that’s more or less enough for me.”

“Then so be it,” responded the king, smiling widely. Mites looked at Treva, who just shrugged. “It would be my honor to fight by your side,” said Mites.

“That only leaves one thing left for you all to do,” said the king. “I think Pruden is still expecting visitors.” Akuldra nodded. If there was a wizard on the other side of the war, they would need to talk to their own and figure out where they stood. Coincidentally at that moment, a servant made his way into the room. “Your majesty, the wizard has requested an audience with all the six guests.”

“Are you sure he wants to meet with all of them?” asked the king, looking over at the two thieves who had made their way into his room last night. Even though he had forgave them, since they had helped Akuldra after all, Locke still didn’t completely trust them. But he wasn’t one to question the wizard. The mystical man had ways of dealing with things Locke may never understand.

“You know what, why don’t you lead them to the wizard’s chambers right now?” He said over to the man. The party got up, thanking the king and queen for their bountiful hospitality. “I hope you can start as soon as possible,” said the king to Akuldra who nodded before following the rest out into the halls, closing the doors behind them.

“Well, that was fun,” said Treva. She lept in bounds ahead of the rest, slowing down whenever she got too far ahead.

“The king and queen seemed very hospitable, not a fan of their kids though,” Bella whispered under her breath to avoid anyone hearing her. “Ya that’s true enough. I’ll probably sock ‘em in the eye the next time I see them,” said Treva calmly. Everyone raised their eyebrow, looking over at the servant that was leading them. “Oh don’t worry about me. I’ve wanted to do that for a long time now,” he said. This got a laugh out of Treva.

“By the way Bella, I have something important to tell you,” said Curmo. “When I was talking to the king, I asked him about dispatching a squadron of soldiers to Belveyon. He agreed.” Bella gasped, her eyes brimming with tears. “Oh thank god. It was scary knowing that everyone was so close to the attack.”

Akuldra sighed deeply. It was good that Belveyon was getting protection, but he couldn’t help but feel guilty for what had happened to Folsele. If only he had known, he couldn have helped. Maybe he could have fought off the wizard. But they were obviously too late.

“You can’t worry about that now,” said Mites, seemingly reading Akuldra’s mind. “What’s done is done and it wasn’t your fault.” Akuldra smiled looking over at his new friend. “How did you know what I was thinking about?”

Mites looked ahead thinking about what had happened to his own family. “You and I are a lot alike Akuldra. But guilt isn’t something we can burden ourselves with now. The past is something to learn from, not something to dwell on.”

They had made their way over to a staircase now, but one that was much different than the others in the castle. In fact, it was even secluded to one side of the hallway, almost hidden. They had missed it on their way to the dining hall, but now couldn’t imagine how that would

have been possible. It was a narrow stone staircase spiraling upwards. The stairs were misshapen, discolored, and grimy. Everyone looked at each other sideways, slightly confused.

“Umm, I don’t think you were to escort us to prison, good sir,” said Felix, trying to get a look up the staircase. “Oh no, this is the way to the wizard’s room. Go right up this way and you’ll see it at the top step, hard to miss.”

Akuldra cocked his head slightly at the man, it didn’t seem like he was lying. Shrugging his shoulders, he took his first steps forward, leading the way up the staircase. “Be careful, it is quite slippery. I don’t think the wizard was expecting company.” The others followed in line, with Bella and Curmo going in tail after Akuldra, followed by Felix and finally Treva and Mites. They all took each step cautiously, nearly avoiding falling backwards a couple of times. The dark and damp air was periodically broken by a hole carved into the side of the wall as a window. The air was thick and heavy, almost like the smell back in the tunnels, but even stronger. Akuldra couldn’t understand why this eyesore of a place would ever be in the center of a place as beautiful and vast as Endridge castle.

“I think I’m going to die from suffocation,” said Curmo, coughing with every step they took higher. “I know what you mean,” responded Felix from further below. “This place feels more like a cave than a staircase in a tower.”

“I think this is some twisted joke from the king,” said Mites from the back, pushing cobwebs that threatened to hit his face. “Maybe those god-awful royal children set them up to this, well accept that little girl. She seemed nice enough,” said Treva, actually slipping on the next step, Mites catching her just in time.



Soon, they came upon a large wooden door at the top of the staircase. There was another window here as well and the party could tell just how high up they really were. No other tower in the castle was blocking their view. Curmo suddenly got a chill when he realised where they were now. The shock of it was hitting him like a freight train.

Even Akuldra felt this hesitation in his bones. “Alright, behind this door is an actual wizard. This is no longer a tale about war and victory told by our fathers, but something in front of our very eyes. ”

“Ya, I was never told stories about war but I know enough about the wizard as it is.” chimed in Treva, trying to get a peek at the door. The whole of the party was slightly on edge, almost scared. “Oh can we just knock on the door now already. The suspense is killing me!” said Bella, to which Akuldra nodded, knocking on the door. Everyone held their breaths, waiting for the moment of truth.

Slowly, but surely, the door began to creak open, but not to a face, but pitch darkness, worse than the little light they had on the way up here. Akuldra looked back, to the faces of the others, urging him forward. With a sigh he stepped into the room, and everyone followed in tail.

“Hey watch it!” said Akuldra as the others behind started bumping into him. “Just try to feel around for the wall and stay by it. Hello! Oh great and powerful wizard! We are but humble observers to your presence, but you have requested an audience with the six of us. I presume you will to show yourself as well.” He bowed down all the way, one leg crossed behind the other.

A candle light flickered on at the far end of the room. It seemed a lot further down than they had thought the room would go. They followed it, making sure not to bump into anything along the way, but they still ended up bumping into what felt like furniture. They slowly

stumbled across until they reached the candle. It seemed to be placed on a table. Akuldra pitched it up, turning it around... to reveal a face staring right back at them.

Everyone but Akuldra screamed at the top of their lungs at the sight of the grinning face. They all jumped behind the Akuldra, who stared dead into the man's eyes. "Well, you must be fun at gatherings," said the wizard before snapping his fingers. Candles around the room began to light up one by one. Slowly but surely, the whole of the place came into view. They all saw the man standing in front of them.

The wizard, Pruden, was deathly old. His body was shivering like an overexcited dog. His skin was horribly wrinkly and was practically wrapped around his bones. Pruden must have been very tall at one point, but he slouched now, barely maintaining his posture. On his face were dark black spots. His head was completely bald, as expected.

The most obvious and strangest feature on the man was his moustache. It stretched across his face and even extended beyond it. It was like something you would find in a drawing, but on a real person.

Pruden wore the fancy garbs they had seen on the king and prince, but his looked a lot more traditional. At his waist was a belt with what seemed to be weapons of every sort. There was an array of blades at his waist. There were also about three to four battle axes which dangled down, nearly touching the floor. On the left side of the belt was a large crossbow and Scythe. On his back was a large wooden bow and a quiver which was filled to the brim with arrows. Overall, this much weaponry should have been enough to make a person fall with exhaustion, but not the wizard. He seemed to carry it with plenty of ease.

They all looked at the strange man, he looked battle ready, but at the same time too weak to get out of bed on his own. "Welcome to my humble abode." With this, four giant chandeliers dropped out from the thin air to illuminate the remainder of the room. Pruden's tower was just as strange as he was himself.

The first thing they were all shocked to see was the sheer size and magnitude of the room. The whole place was as large as the first hall they had walked into when they broke into the castle, the one with all the guests. It was about the size of ten of their own rooms they had slept in the night before put together.

There were spectacles in the room itself. Shelves clung to the walls surrounding the entire circular room. On them were bottles of potions and poisons. Strange writings were scrawled on the different potions denoting what they were, but no one could make any sense of it. There were also staircases all across the room. Some led to doors, others led to nothing at all. One of the staircases led to the next floor of the room. This floor consisted of a balcony that stretched the inside perimeter of the room. Looking up from where they all were, you could see shelves of books lining up the entire length of that floor, stretching across the room. There were ladders placed periodically, to get the books from the higher shelves.

Strange contraptions, maybe meant for flight or boating lay scattered around the place. There were also floating items. Some of the books on the next floor stood in the middle of the air. There were piles of junk and furniture that also lay hither-thither. The only thing that seemed neat or organized was a glass casing in the direct center of the room. A large window atop the castle let in the light that fell upon the casing. Even though the sun wasn't directly above them, the slight fell straight down, as if it were instructed to do so at any hour of the day. In this casing

was a small wooden stick, around the size of a quill, but it was entrancing. Curmo couldn't help but look away from it.

"I hope you'll excuse the mess. I didn't have time to clean before you arrived," said the wizard. The children stepped out from behind Akuldra now, gawking at the strange things in the room. "Please have a seat, I'll be back in just a moment."

The party looked around, spotting the couches at the right hand side of the room. They made their way over to it, avoiding all the furniture across the room. Sitting down uncomfortable, they all looked back to where Pruden had just been, and now he was gone. All that lay in his wake were flower petals that lightly billowed in the wind.

"Wow," said Bella, quite shocked at her recent encounter. "That was the wizard." Akuldra nodded, not taking his eyes off the wand in the center of the room. "I- well, what..." Treva tried saying. "This guy must be serious, he actually left Treva speechless," said Mites, smiling at his shocked sister, who slugged him across the arm.

"Look at this place though," said Curmo, staring from the strange contraptions to the floating objects. One of these things, a plate filled with food, made its way over to the party, making Mites flinch slightly. On it was an array of cheeses and fruits.

Even though they had just eaten, the party could help but take a bite from the mystical platter. "I can't believe it. This is where the wizard lives. We are seeing a place that most people only dream of in their lifetimes." said Bella. She seemed more excited than nervous.

"I can't believe that was the wizard. Did you see the way he looked?" said Akuldra, thinking back to the war ready man. He seemed so strong and powerless at the same time. There

was something about him though, that immediately put him at ease. Curmo had felt this too, and he just couldn't explain it.

“I hear he’s slain over a thousand monsters in his lifetime,” said a voice from behind them, which resulted in a few more surprised yelps. Looking back they saw the wizard approaching them. This time, all his weapons were gone and he was just wearing the simple and traditional garments.

“Now let’s take a good look at the lot of you,” he said, eyeing each of the six sitting on the couch. “Yes, it really is all of you, and you’ve brought friends! Wow, I didn’t think it would happen this fast.” He slowly sat down in a seat in front of them, holding onto a wooden cane. It seemed as if the weight of his mustache itself would be weighing him down.

“Do you know who I am,” asked Akuldra, narrowing his eyes. This wizard seemed strange and he didn’t know if he could trust him quite yet. “Ah, Akuldra. The son of Viri. The great deviant. Your destiny holds greatness for you. Of course I know you. I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time. Ever since your father left for Folsele.”

They all raised their eyebrows. “There was no way you could’ve known I was coming here so long ago,” Akuldra exclaimed. “I didn’t even know I was supposed to come here.” The wizard nodded, looking over the skeptical faces of the rest of the group. “Alright then, let me prove it to you.”

He first looked over at Akuldra with a zany grin. “My dear boy Akuldra, you’ve grown up a soldier. Your father Viri was a great friend of mine. He must have taught you well to keep you on your toes. Besides, being a deviant is no easy task. And you already may know this, but your father no longer lives. Maybe as of... a week ago” Akuldra’s face dropped and Bella looked

over at him concerningly. He was hiding so much pain inside him. She placed a hand on his shoulder, but Akuldra just nodded, looking back up. “Well that much is true. But you said you knew him? As in my father lived in Endridge?”

“Lived here?” Said the wizard, shocked. “Son he was the general that brought the Viserwen forces to their knees. He fought a valiant battle and brought glory to the whole continent. There is much he didn’t tell you Akuldra. But you have returned to your home, to continue your father’s legacy.”

Akuldra stared at Pruden wide eyed, his mouth slightly ajar. Thinking back to his days as a boy, sword-fighting with his father in the streets of Folsele. He had often asked him about his past, about his mother, anything. And Viri would always respond saying he would find out one day. This is what he was talking about. His father was from Endridge.

“And... and my mother,” asked Akuldra. “Did you know her? Did my father ever mention her?” They all looked from in-between Akuldra and the wizard, feeling weird for being there for such a personal conversation. “I’m afraid boy, I do not know. Viri did have a wife, but none of us even knew before we saw your little feet waddling through our castles very halls. When your father left for Folsele, he said his wife had already left. She may still be out there, or she may be dead.” Akuldra nodded, slightly broken, but understanding what the wizard was telling him. There was no way to know.

“Well enough about that, let’s take a look at the rest of you here,” said the wizard, snapping everyone back to reality. “There are six of you. Hmm, that should do just fine. You dear boy, would you like to introduce yourself?” The wizard looked at Curmo inquisitively.

“Oh me? Hello great wizard, my name is Curmo and I am of Belveyon. We have journeyed to Endridge to deliver the information of the information of the invading northern forces with Akuldra here. I am humbled to be in your presense,” Curmo bowed slightly, making the wizard laugh. “None of that dear boy. And Pruden is fine. And, well, you aren’t human are you?”

Curmo shook his head, giving Akuldra a sideways look. “Apparently I’m a Pertur, though I don’t really understand my magic all that well.” The wizard nodded. “You will learn to. Don’t you worry about that. Alright then, who might you be?” He said over to Bella.

“Hi! I’m Bella and like Curmo said, we’re both from Belveyon. I’m afraid I have nothing to offer you besides my services.” Pruden stroked his long mustache. “Bella, it is a pleasure to make your aquaintaince, but I do believe there is something you bring to offer.” Bella scratched her head, not understanding what Pruden was telling her. “Let’s wait for just a moment before we get into that,” he chimed in, looking over at Felix now.

“Umm... well.. I’m not really important sir,” he sheepishly looked down at the ground, scratching his elbow.

“Look up at me boy,” said the wizard, to which Felix brought his attention to Pruden. “There is not a single unimportant creature of the Earth. There are no accidents in this world and our meeting was inevitable. Now, since we were destined to meet, I would like to get to know a little bit about why.” Felix nodded, feeling a little more reassured about himself than before

“Well, my name is Felix sir. These three crashed into my farm back in the Great Plains,” Felix indicated to Akuldra, Bella, and Curmo. “I helped them ride here on an equal before we go to the castle. My father is a common merchant in Endridge as well, his name is Fideli.”

The wizard snapped his fingers, realizing what he was missing before. “Now that’s who you remind me of. I knew Fideli. Your father used to bring provisions to the king himself, with dishes and meats from across the lands.” Felix raised his eyebrows. He never knew his father was that important, and that he was in connection with the king. He was taken aback as he realized how much there really was that he hadn’t known about him.

“And an equex? That’s a difficult creature to control. Curmo here was able to ride the dragon because of his magic, but an equex is a beautiful creature of the sea, really hard to tame. For anyone but an experienced Pertur to ride it means you have a good heart. You are a trusting and loyal person Felix, and never lose that.” He was gleaming now, feeling proud for what the wizard had told him. He had never been praised this much in his life before, and it honestly felt good.

“Alright then, let’s move onto... well look at you. You’re a large man aren’t you,” said the wizard, making eye contact with Mites. Mites shrugged, saying, “I don’t know about that but my name is Mites. Me and Treva here are Endrigean and we live on the streets.”

“Tell me Mites, have you often been forced to fight or dual before?” Mites looked at him surprised. “Well it happens more than you can imagine. This little one here gets in a lot of trouble, and I often find myself backed in an alley fighting three to four men. Nothing I can’t handle though.” The wizard smiled. Yes, he would do just nicely.

“Alright then, let’s see the trouble-maker. You must be Treva then?” Treva nodded, crossing her arms and leaning back on the chair. “Ya that’s me. I’ve been stealing and surviving since I was zero. My whole life, I’ve grown up tough. In fact, I was able to break in here all by myself.” Everyone held their breaths, thinking she must have insulted the great wizard, but he



just chuckled, feeling impressed by Treva's persona in front of him. "You are quite confident aren't you?" Treva just shrugged, tugging on a thread on her left sleeve.

"Well, I am truly in luck, because as it stands, I need the help of each and every one of you." They all looked amongst each other wondering the same thing. What did the all powerful wizard need with them. Akuldra maybe but the rest of them?

"There is a contingency with the future I could have never predicted. I don't want to get into too much detail right now, but the future is extremely unstable as I have foreseen two possibilities that are extremely probable, but also mutually exclusive." They all continued looking at him scratching their heads. "In simpler terms, two very possible outcomes of the future can come to be. I have been trying my best to figure out how to defeat the northern invasion, but you all might be the key. You all might be the ones to break the contingency. When the future is as unstable as it is now, the only way to meet your destiny is to carve it yourself. The perfection and randomness of six random strangers at my doorsteps with the exact qualities I need is not something I can turn away. So what do you say, are you willing to help?"

They all looked amongst each other. A group of ragtags that would never have even known each other. Six people who the world had placed not expecting anything of them. They were now caught up in something so much greater than themselves, and were all thinking the same thing. Treva turned back to the wizard, trying to contain her excitement. "Sure, sounds fun!" The others nodded in agreement. Pruden sighed in relief. "That's wonderful news!. I feel like I'm missing something though... Ah."

“Now, Bella, there was something important I had left out for you.” Her ears perked up as she looked back at the strange man. “You are a very unique soul. Your heart holds not a single ounce of violence or vengeance. I can see it in you. There are those in here that are ready to kill, even now, but you shall never be. It wouldn’t matter if they were human or monster. And for that reason, your destiny is to become the next wizard after me.”

It was as if time had stopped. Pruden had been dropping information so heavy it would immediately sink to the bottom of the sea, but this was different. This was about her. She was supposed to be the next what!? “I’m afraid you are mistaken, I hold no magic,” said Bella.

Pruden laughed, holding his stomach and standing up now. He made his way over to the window and looked over at the wondrous nation he had built out of nothing. “I wasn’t born with magic, I was granted it by the Earth because she saw greatness in me. The three wizards were placed on this world to maintain it, but it seems my journey will come to an end very soon. I am the oldest of the three wizards, maybe by a couple of millenia. If I die, my power will go back into the very soil beneath me. But that cannot happen. The world still needs a wizard. Endridge still needs a wizard. The power of the Earth is to control and maintain, not to destroy. There are not many I have met that I wouldn’t entrust this power to Bella, but I will be passing on my own to you.”

She looked over at Curmo, who was looking exactly how she felt. Everything that was being said to them was so serious and amazing, but also so confusing. Was this something that she would be able to do? “Do I... do I have to live here?” she asked meekly, looking around the room, which resulted in Pruden laughing again. “Well is there something wrong with it.” Bella refrained from responding. “I only jest with you. No. With the powers, you are free to travel the

world, and if you choose, to return to Belveyon as well. After this battle, though, I entrust you to be able to pass on the power to another whenever you wish.”

Bella nodded, taking in all the information. “And don’t worry about your family,” chimed in the wizard. “There is no better way to keep them safe, if that's what you’re thinking about,” he said with a wink. He seemed to know what every single person in the room was thinking.

Bella sighed, letting the silence drown out everything else. All eyes were on her now, Pruden made his way back over to his seat and raised his eyebrows, waiting for her response. She looked around her one last time, to all the faces she had gotten to see in the last few days. With a heavy sigh she turned back to Pruden and said, “If this is my destiny, it would be my honor to accept.” Bella gave a courtesy, smiling at the wizard. Everyone else cheered, patting her on the back.

“Don’t worry boy,” said Pruden, looking over at Curmo. “She’ll be in good hands.” Curmo knew this was true enough. If there was anywhere in the continent that was still safe, it was with the wizard, and he couldn’t be happier that Bella would be with Pruden.

“Now, onto business,” said the wizard with a thunderous clap to snap everyone out of their daze. “I know why you’re here. The mission you embarked on was to get the king the information about the oncoming northern forces.”

“Wait, you knew about the invasion?” said Treva. “Then why didn’t you tell the king yourself.” Everyone else was basically thinking the same thing.

“There is no help the king can do to save the continent now. It is up to you six to change the very chance of survival.” Pruden’s face went from the joyous grin to a more somber realization. The fate of everything was on the shoulders of them now.

“Curmo, you shall travel east to find the third wizard. Your magic is strong, you will be able to face the adversities of the island in which he resides. If there is anyone that can counter Aelnoq’s, my other brother’s, power then it’s him. I’m afraid I am too weak for battle, and it will definitely take some time for Bella to train herself. Felix you are to join him and guide him along the way. You are intelligent. Weak, but intelligent. Use that. You two shall face many challenges, but nothing you cannot overcome. Mites and Akuldra, you two are to forge the most powerful army in the continent. You both shall train the Endrigian soldiers harder than they ever have before. With you as general, the battle shall be a glorious one.” The two nodded, and clasped hands. They would give rise to a powerful army, no matter what. “And Treva, you are to travel south towards Enacreon and the neighboring kingdoms. Try to contain the infighting and bring them together. We will need unity, and greater numbers, if we are to stand our ground. None of this will be easy, but I know you’ll all rise to your task and make history proud. Great tales will be spoken of your heroism and glory.”

Everyone had been assigned their posts. This was actually happening. Their whole lives had been turned around in an instant. They had gone from being nobodies to the fate of the world relying on their soldiers. “There is one more thing to know before you embark,” said the wizard. “I am used to knowing what will happen in the future, but a recent realization has made me more blind than ever before. The son of Earth is to stop the oncoming forces, the third wizard, but I fear he shall be slain before he can.”

The voices in the room silenced. What could this mean? How could two completely opposite futures coincide. “The truth is, I don’t know what is going to happen. And if the third wizard does die, it will be up to the armies to stop these forces. I have long awaited for your

arrival, planning out what I would say to each and every one of you when you came. At this moment, I realize that the wait has been worth it. You all will go on to save all of us from the grips of death itself. I know this is a lot of information to comprehend at once, but you will realize your futures. Even though I don't know what is to come, I have faith. I trust you all to help me."

A very scary silence overtook the room. Everyone could feel the weight of his words, and as a single tear began to roll down Pruden's face, he suddenly jumped up. "Well now that that's over with, food anybody?" About a hundred plates filled with juicy meat and sweet cakes flew out right in front of them. The lights brightened and a set of instruments at the side of the room began to play a jolly tune.

Treva laughed looking at the merry chaos around her, stuffing her face full of food. They all slowly broke out of their daze and joined Treva, laughing and eating. They started talking about what they had heard and congratulating Bella on becoming the next wizard. Mites and Akuldra started discussing what they would do about the army and Curmo silently smiled at everyone, thinking about his parents. He would meet them soon. Treva was going on about how she actually had the most important job and Felix was blabbering on and on about how he would be the best guide there ever was. The future was to come soon, but for right now, they were all happy. For now everything was okay.

Pruden slowly made his way over to the window looking outside to the world, seeing a glint of black smoke in the distance. Looking back he saw the party of six. The ones that were to change the face of this very world. How was he supposed to tell them, to let them know that one of them wouldn't make it out of this alive?

## **CHAPTER 12: Redemption**

Virago trudged along the side of the path, the sound of howling wolves once again in the distance, she needed to get to safety soon. The rain was pattering over her shirt. She had taken off her armour to load onto the Ferox as she was chasing the dragon. It wasn't much later after her fight at the beach that she had lost the creature. It had dawned on her soon enough that no beast would be able to travel that fast with three people on its back, even a dragon. She'd been tricked, and the deviant could be anywhere by now. Through the darkness, she could make out a small light up ahead, there was a camp. This might be the only place she'd be able to get any help.

Virago's head still hurt fiercely. The deviant had held his own pretty well. She was actually surprised he was able to hold his own against her. The deviants were sure enough insanely strong, but this one was also intelligent. He parried each one of her hits with perfect accuracy, striking back with his own blows which she was barely able to dodge. It was a dance they were both playing, a single misstep leading to a painful surprise.

But he had eventually won, getting the best of her when she was distracted. Virago felt such a hatred for him. How could she have been so distracted. It was that kid. The green haired one that was with the deviant. Probably a Pertur. He had pushed back her Ferox without even pushing it. No pertur should be able to do that. Who was this kid? And why was the deviant traveling with a party?

Virago patted her friend on his long neck, thinking about the fall he must have taken back on the beach. They were getting closer to the light now, approaching this camp. The muddy land

below her formed into solid ground. This was a good clearing. Her breathing was heavy now. Chasing the dragon was hard work, and it was worse knowing it was in vain.

Gylbard would not be leashed with her when he found out she had let the deviant escape. But that was okay. He probably couldn't stay mad at her for long.

"Hey who is that up there!" came a sound from the camp. A man on horseback galloped up to Virago. He held up a lantern to illuminate Virago's face and his own. He was a young boy, definitely younger than herself. The boy had muddy blonde hair, which matched his poorly formed beard. His face was scrunched up in concern upon seeing the Ferox.

"Relax, he's mine. Tamed," said Virago, placing her hand gently on the creature's head to prove her point. She wasn't all wrong either. Most of the Feroxs she'd seen were savage and wild, and her's had been too. Ever since he got hit by that Pertur, he'd calmed down completely. Could barely tunnel for a few breaths now.

"Well, are you lost? Do you need any help?" asked the boy.

"No, if it's alright with you I'll just turn back into a stormy night with no food. Thanks." Virago's voice oozed with sarcasm and disingenuity. The boy taking the hint, nodded and indicated for Virago to follow her.

"My name is Auxy," said the boy as he handed Virago the lantern to guide her way. "We're traveling over to Belveyon from the Eslov ports. Heard it's beautiful up there in the mountains, especially the sunrises. Besides, us Eslovians have to trade." He chuckled, expecting Virago to follow suit, but immediately stopped when she didn't.

"I'm Molly," said Virago. "I came down this way from the farmland up north towards, where did you say you were from?"

“Oh- Eslov, miss.” he responded.

“Right, Eslov. To trade.” Now she wished she had taken more time to go over the map and study the domain. It would be hard to fake her way through this. “I did pass Belveyon on my way though. Great place I guess.”

They were at the camp now. She could see tents pitched up, people exiting them as they felt the rain stop overhead. This water was strange. It was as if it had stopped on a whim, very unnaturally. Virago shrugged it off as she moved ahead, watching all eyes turn on her. She pushed back her locks of wet hair from across her face to get a better look around her. The tents were all pitched in a large semi circle. There were about ten to fifteen Eslovians at the camp. They had started working on a fire at the center of camp now, taking out the fire wood from one of the tents. Towards the front of the camp, about seven horses were hitched to a post of trees.

The camp was full of young men and women like Auxe. There was also an old couple and about three kids. They all started profusely at Virago and her strange animal now. “Everyone!” Auxe announced, bringing the attention to himself. “We will be having a visitor for tonight. I found this maiden a few paces down that way. She is on her way to Eslov herself. Let’s give her an Eslovian welcome!” With this, the men and women smiled and reluctantly came over to her, before Virago finally rolled her eyes and sent her Ferox off towards the patch of trees.

The Eslovians now approached her confidently, giving her fresh towels to dry her off and bringing her over to the fire. Well, this was nice.

They sat her down by the fire, grabbing a large bowl of soup and placing it over the fire to heat up. “The food will be ready soon,” said Auxe. “Now everyone, you know the rules. We eat for an hour and then head inside the tents and stay there till tomorrow. Miss Molly, you can



stay in that tent over there,” he said, pointing over one by the corner. Two of the children stood outside it, waving over to her. She waved back.

As Auxe was going into his own tent to dry off, Virago stopped him, to ask, “Why the one hour, though?” She was picking up that something wasn’t right as everyone quieted up and looked down towards the ground. Auxe took a moment to soak in the question. “There’s something out here in the plains Miss Molly. We’ve been camped here for around three days now. Everytime we try to move forward, we get attacked. I could barely get a good look at the creature myself. We lost a man already. So we move in the daytime only, staying in the tents at night. I’d recommend you to leave your way, but it’s probably the safest to just stay near camp.”

“Did you try hunting it?” asked Virago as she grabbed a bowl and made her way over to the giant pot over the fire. “I beg your pardon?” responded Auxe. “The creature. I doubt it’d stand a chance if a few of you went out and tried to hunt it. You’d make much greater time towards Belveyon as well.”

The group around her began to laugh, thinking about the ridiculous idea. “Hunt a monster? Can a sheep hunt a wolf?”

Virago raised her eyebrows. “If the sheep doesn’t want more of its flock dead.” The silent chuckling stopped immediately. Some of the women started ushering their children inside immediately now, afraid of Virago’s words. “Miss Molly, we are not fighters. We are simple traders. The only weapon I have on my person is a knife. What makes you think we stand a chance?” asked Auxe.

“Well, now you have me. Get two men ready and we’ll move into the woods at once. Bring just one lantern and your knives. Everyone else stay inside your tents until I give the

word.” Virago sat down crossed legged back where she had been ushered, eating the stew, which was surprisingly good. All heads had turned to her and the people were staring. Who was this woman? How was she so confident in herself?

“Sorry Molly was it?” asked a woman near her, the one who had given her the towels. “My name is Amara. I’m Auxe’s wife. You really think you can help us?”

“Amara, don’t entertain this-,” he got cut off immediately by Amara glaring up at him. “Corvus, god rest his soul, died, Auxe. He was my brother. Now tomorrow, what if that thing came back to kill me or our child?” She said, placing a hand over her stomach. Amara’s eyes were filled with tears.

Virago looked down towards her bowl, hastily taking in large spoonfuls of the stew. This was getting awkward pretty fast.

“Did you see that thing out there though? It was like a giant snake! What makes you think she can help us kill it!” said Auxe pointing over to Virago. “None taken,” she responded, whistling out loud, calling over her Ferox, which trotted up to her, making the others near her flinch.

She grabbed the saddle bag and pulled out her sword hiding behind it. Taking it out of its sheath, Virago threw the blade in the air, catching it with her other hand and spinning it counter clockwise, just barely before it hits the ground, and throwing it back up. She caught it this time with her other hand and swung the sword in an eight formation occasionally spinning herself before landing one final blow to a small tree near them, slicing it nearly half way with her powerful blow.

The others stared at her, wide mouthed. They had never seen such a wardsperson in their lives. She handled the blade with such comfort and ease it felt as if it were her own arm. “Alright so I can bring my friend Fedor with us, get the lantern, and we’ll follow your lead.”

Virago smiled, somewhat glad that she was going to get to do some killing. Amara stood up and rushed over to Virago, hugging her. “Thank you so much. We owe you our lives. You’re like an angel sent from the heavens.”

Virago sighed, hugging the woman back. She couldn't quite explain what it was, but there was another pleasure that she felt from this. More than the excitement from the potential kill, it was another warm feeling. She felt good that she was helping these people.

More of the women stood up now, making their way over to Virago, thanking her for helping them.

“Give me just a moment,” said Virago finally, grabbing the Ferox and making her way over to the patch of trees just outside the clearing. She pulled out the saddlebag with the armour and laced it on, covering the emblem for Viserwen with mud making sure that no one was matching her. She made her way back to camp now, hitching her own ride to a small post.

“Wow, you’re a soldier?” asked Auxy, who was staring at the mud covered silves plates that covered her body. “My whole life,” responded Virago, picking up her sword and grasping it with her right hand tightly.

She turned to face the rest of camp. “Please, everyone, stay in your tents and don’t come out until you hear me give the word. Chances are we’ll come back.” Auxy’s eyes got wide, but he didn’t say anything. “So we will make sure not to lead the beast back to camp. Stay hidden

and stay quiet. We'll be back soon," Virago smiled warmly, looking directly at Amara. She smiled back, nodding.

"Alright boys," said Virago with a sigh, turning to face the northward direction. "Lets go." Auxe and Fedor nodded following behind her.

"Do you really think this is going to work," said Fedor now, holding the lantern out in front of him. "Probably not if you keep talking like that. Stay low," responded Virago, to which Fedor gulped and crouched to match the height of the undergrowth. The forest was silent. The only sounds were of the wind gliding between the trees and the soft trill of the night's insects.

"What did you say this creature looked like again?" whispered Virago. "It was a winding snake with tough skin. It's feet clattered loudly though, so it wasn't exactly a snake," Auxe responded, staying quiet as well.

"Sounds like you have a scolopendra on your hands," said Virago looking up towards the trees now. Scolopendra were known to climb as well as dig underground. There was practically no telling where it would come from. Their only chance of survival would be getting the jump on the creature without it noticing. Although the chances of that were lower. Virago chose to withhold this information from the two men. Once she set her eyes on a kill, Virago needed to go for it, and in this case, she couldn't afford to turn back.

The woods slowly closed behind her as they entered into the dense woods. Virago raised an open palm looking around. Fedor kept on moving forward while Auxe stopped behind her. Virago sighed trying to contain her frustration.

“Oh, sorry,” responded Fedor as he moved back slightly. He didn’t seem like the most intelligent person in the world.

The sound of the insects began to quiet a little while up ahead as Virago heard the scuttering across the forest floor Auxe had mentioned. Fedor began to poke her arm repeatedly, which Virago swatted away. His face was in horror as he indicated towards the direction in which the sound was coming from. Virago nodded, scowling. She turned to Auxe, indicating for him to move forward. They might make it out of this without too many scratches if they played their cards right.

Auxe reluctantly followed her, a knife in his hands, which were shaking. He looked as if he were about to faint. Virago noticed this immediately as she made direct eye contact with him, holding his hands. She made very obvious breaths in and out, and Auxe followed suit, slowly calming down. Virago nodded again moving further ahead, on top of a small incline to get a look at the creature. Auxe followed behind her. Fedor tried to, but was stopped by Virago, who asked him to douse the light first.

They all stood atop the hill now, behind some shrubbery, lying down close to the ground. There was a silence now. The wind seemed to have stopped blowing and not a single creature uttered a sound from around them. Suddenly, they heard it again. The scurrying of the scolopendra across leaf leaves and grass.

And there it was, the creature came out into the clearing some feet ahead of them. Virago’s heart momentarily stopped. Seeing the thing for the first time was much different. The scolopendra. The long winding body of the creature stopped midway in the clearing, allowing the light of the moon to illuminate its body. The beast was enormous, around the height of a child

and as long as a serpent. Its body was broken up into segments, each sprouting two giant legs on either side. On its head were two long antennae, which were feeling around. Its whole body was black and red, except for its antennae and legs, which were a bright yellow. Its face was blank; the creature was blind. It stood still, feeling the air for any movements.

Very quietly, Virago whispered. “Whatever you do, don’t move.” She didn’t have to tell them twice. Fedor and Auxy were frozen in fear, staring at the beast wide-eyed. Its legs twitched slightly, picking up the scent of some new humans. Virago was contemplating lighting up the lantern and tossing it at the creature when something interesting caught her eye hanging from a tree right near the beast. On it, was a man, his legs laced with vines, hanging unconscious from a top branch.

“Is that him?” she whispered, ever so quietly. Auxy looked at her confused before directing his gaze to where she was pointing. His teeth clenched up as he realized what it was. His brother in law was there. Hanging upside down from the tree. Corvus looked deathly sick and pale, but he was alive. There were other animals from the forest hanging from the trees. Wolves, bucks, rabbits, and so many others. It wasn’t trying to kill, it was trying to survive.

Virago sighed. This was going to be a lot harder than she initially thought. She would have to kill the beast and save Corvus. This was it. This was the thrill, the challenge, that she needed to get back on her feet. Nodding, she indicated the others back down the hill slightly, so they could talk.

“What is that thing!?” said Fedor, slightly louder than he should have. Virago quickly peeked to see if the scolopendra had heard them, it had not. “Your demise if you don’t quiet

down. Seriously, why'd we bring him along?" whispered Virago harshly. He quickly nodded and looked away. "What are we going to do?" said Auxy.

Virago scrunched up her brows and held her hands close to her face. She thought back to prisoner situations she had to deal with in her battles. If it were up to Gylbard or Mortek, they would probably leave the man to die for the greater good. But this wasn't something Virago could do, even though it would be the easiest option.

"Okay I have an idea," said Virago, nodding. This might just work. "What is it?" asked Auxy, not exactly thrilled to try whatever Virago had in mind. "I'm gonna not tell you," responded with a sly grin. "You won't want to otherwise."

His eyes widened as Fedor said, "Guys I think it knows we're here," pointing over the hill towards the creature. Peeking again overhead, Virago saw the beast moving closer and closer to their location, in a zigzag pattern.

"Perfect, this makes it easier," she said. "Excuse me?" responded Fedor, raising his eyebrows and slightly backing away from Virago. "Okay at my count, I want you," she pointed at Auxy, "to follow me down that way. And Fedor, try not to move too much."

"What do you-," in an instant, Virago pushed Fedor out in the clearing. "Ahh!" He yelled as he crashed into the thick forest floor, the creature veered its head towards him and moved faster than Virago had seen it before. "GO go go now!" she screamed, pulling Auxy behind her towards the tree at full sprint. It felt as though their feet were covered in tar and that they were going to fall over at any second. The undergrowth reached out and tried to pull at their feet, to no avail eventually.

They never turned back to see if the scolopendra had followed them, but the fear that it would allow them to go as fast as they could. As they approached the tree, Virago tossed her sword to Auxe, grabbing the knife from his hand. "Don't let it climb the tree, it's pretty good at that. Be back in a second." With that, she smiled and leapt up, weaving through hanging bodies of living creatures and carcasses alike. "Wait stay here! Oh I'm going to die today," whimpered Auxe as he grasped the blade with his hands turning around to the creature, who was still standing over Fedor.

There was an awful stench of the animals that killed her nose and nearly blinded her vision. Virago held her breath as she jumped from one branch to another. Halfway up, she turned around, and to her horror, saw the creature making its way back to Auxe. "Look out!" she yelled from above. The beast scurried hurriedly, gaining great distance fast. Were these other humans trying to steal my food? Well they would die for that.

"Strike it Auxe!" yelled Virago from above, hanging onto the last rung of the branch. Closing his eyes tight, Auxe brought the blade up over his head. The creature was nearly in front of him. He could hear the deafening scream and the ground itself seemed to rumble from its approach. With all his might, Auxe brought down the sword right across the scolopendra's face. The beast roared louder than it had before. Virago saw a few of the birds that had dared to stray near them quickly fly away.

Auxe stood still, holding the blade with disbelief, not understanding what had happened. The creature stumbled around, feeling at the large gash across its face. He looked up, with his mouth hanging wide open. Virago was staring down at him, grinning from ear to ear. "I did it!" said Auxe, feeling exhilarated. A feeling of pure power and confidence. "You sure did pal!" said



Virago before continuing up the tree. He held the blade tighter now, standing on wide legs, facing the creature again. He was ready this time.

Virago reached the top rung where Corvus was, placing a light two fingers on his neck. She felt a weak pulse under his soft and clammy skin. Up close, she could see his face was a brighter red than it should be. He must have been hanging here for awhile now. She started making her way through the vine with Auxe's small knife, which was surprisingly helpful.

She cut through the vine completely now, holding his body before it fell, pulling him onto the same tree branch she was standing on. A loud ticking sound filled the sky, this time not from the insects of the night, but from the flailing monster. It was tapping all its feet, shaking its head from side to side.

"Auxe," said Virago, with complete seriousness. "run ... now! Get out of here!" The creature was mad, furious. It was about to charge. "I can handle it!" said Auxe with his newfound confidence. "Don't worry about me."

"I said now!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. Auxe gulped, looking up at her face, which was showing hints of fear for the first time that night. He stumbled back for a second running full sprint in the opposite direction.

"Hey, ugly, up here!" shouted Virago, directing the creature's attention towards her before it decided to follow Auxe. It took the bait. The creature shook off its disorientation, moving in a straight line towards the tree. It started looping up the large sycamore. It smashed through the branches and bodies, bolting directly towards Virago.

Virago looked around for a way out. This was going to be tough. The air was tightening around her, the scolopendra almost at the top of the tree. Looking around, she decided there was only one way out.

“I’m sorry pal,” she said to the body in her hand. Corvus was groaning slightly, coming back to consciousness. Holding him under her left arm, Virago sighed right as the scolopendra reached the top. Now all she had to do was wait for it to get to them. Not yet... not yet... now! She stabbed the scolopendra just as it lunged at her, falling backwards down the tree, crashing through the trees. It screeched loudly, falling down with her.

“Ah- ow -- oof,” each branch brought another pang of pain. She had let go of Corvus, who was in free fall crashing through the branches with her. The ground started approaching her quickly and Virago closed her eyes as she felt the final impact, the ground slamming into her. Thankfully, the tree had slowed her down a good amount before she’d crashed. She heard another thud next to her, Corvus.

“Ah, that went well,” she whimpered, trying to get up. Then, she heard the horrid clicking again. No screech, no shout. Just a loud tapping. Virago quickly looked over to her side, where she saw the scolopendra rearing up to charge at her. Its mouth was foaming and it was staggering slightly. A dark green blood was oozing out of its gashes. She gulped as she backed up next to Corvus.

“I’m so sorry honey, I didn’t mean it,” said Virago, looking around to see if there was a way out. “I’m sure we can sort things out without violence?” The beast must not have wanted to. It wailed looking up at the sky before running at full speed towards her.

Virago put an arm over her face. Well, this was it. There was no way out. Her sword was gone and there was no way she could fight off this thing. She sighed, closing her eyes and nodding. She was ready.

It was on her now, pinning her down. Even though the beast couldn't talk, she knew exactly what it was thinking. It had finally pinned down this annoying human that had tried to steal its food. Virago opened her eyes, looking right into the mouth of the beast. It had a hole of razor sharp teeth. The breath of the creature was horrible. It reeked of rotting food and death.

Virago closed her eyes again, waiting for the pain to be over. And slash. Virago looked up confused. Only inches from her face was the tip of a blade. The scolopendra reared back, stumbling a distance before finally falling down on the ground, as it exhaled its final breath. The beast was dead. Virago sighed, looking over to who had killed the beast. Auxe stood there, trembling.

"You... you almost, you could have died." He could barely speak. "I.. but, I kill- I killed the thing." Virago stood up, groaning. The pain from the fall made her bones ache and throb. She felt as if she had been nearly crushed by a boulder. "You sure did, now let's get out of here before anything else comes here. Where is the other one?"

Looking around, they saw Fedor making his way over to them. He was sprinting at full speed after seeing the beast was dead. "Thank god you're okay!" he rushed over to check on Auxe.

"I'm doing just splendid too, thanks," said Virago sarcastically. "Also were you just sitting there the whole time? And you didn't help?" Fedor looked around uncomfortably,

scratching the back of his head. “I was planning to, but I thought you were going to die anyway so there was no point.”

Virago let out a laugh. At least he was honest. “Well I did too, but Auxy got to me just in time. Way to go bud,” she said, making her way to the creature. He stood proud smiling. The creature looked so weak now, but no less disgusting. Its legs were hanging out from its sides, making involuntary movements. It wasn’t completely dead yet, but it didn’t matter now. Auxy had stabbed it through the head. There was no way it would recover. Virago pulled out the blade, wiping it off on her sleeve.

“Is he alright?” asked Auxy, checking on Corvus. “He’s alive,” responded Virago. “So I guess that’s something.” She made her way over to them now, checking on Corvus. He still had a pulse. He could still be saved.

“He looks so thin and pale. What do you think happened to him?” Fedor looked scared at the nearly dead man and the tree of the dying animals on the tree. “My guess is,” said Virago. “The creature was sucking out its food from the inside. So be careful, he could be poisoned.” Auxy whipped his head to look up at her with wide eyes. “Well I mean, hopefully he’s not. I’m not a complete expert.”

“How did you know so much about the creature in the first place?” asked Fedor. Virago and Auxy helped pick up Corvus. “I’ve encountered probably every beast, including this one, during- well battles.”

They started making their way over to the camp, looking around to make sure nothing was following them. “What battles? I haven’t heard of anywhere where you would have to deal

with many monsters. Unless you're from Folsele or the northern kingdoms." he said with a laugh. "Hey what's with all the questions?" responded Virago quickly.

"She's right Fedor," said Auxe. "Who cares where she encountered the creature. I'm thankful she did otherwise we'd be dead right now. But I have been seeing some really terrifying creatures recently. Something horrible is happening, but I don't know what it is."

Virago sighed. There was no way she could tell them. She couldn't risk revealing who she was. Not until Gylbard said she could. But that didn't matter right now. All that mattered was getting Corvus to the camp and not getting eaten by any other giant bug creatures.

Soon enough, the light of camp came into view. "We're here everyone! You can come out!" shouted Auxe to the empty camp. Not a single person stirred. It was as if the camp had been completely deserted. "What's happening?" said Auxe.

"Oh right," responded Virago. "Guys we're back, you can come out!" The Eslovians started pouring out of the tents to make sure they were okay. "Seriously?" said Auxe annoyed, but smiling. They made their way over to the camp and layed the body onto a bed roll near the fire, letting Corvus rest for some time.

"Oh my god! He's alive!" said Amara as she rushed over to the blood covered, battered party. She checked on her brother with tears in her eyes, sobbing lightly holding his tightly. "Someone get us some water," she said. Fedor rushed off and came back with a waterskin. Amara splashed a little on Corvus's face, he lightly flushed before slowly opening his eyes.

"Amara? Where the hell am I?" he said, looking around. The last thing he could remember was being in the woods getting some firewood, and then the creature. And now he was back?

Virago smiled looking at the scene, picking up the bowl again and making her way over the fire herself. She had never gotten to finish her stew. “I killed it Corvus. I killed the beast!” said Auxy excitedly, to which he got a few surprised remarks from the others. Amara raised her eyebrows at his and looked over at Virago who nodded.

“Well, you’ve worked miracles here today,” she said to Virago, making her way over to the soldier. Her eyes were filled with tears and were bright red. She was talking in between soft sobs. “We owe you our lives. You have saved us and retrieved my brother. I just don’t know how to thank you enough.” She ushered towards one of the children, who brought over a pouch of coins. “We all saw it fit to give you this. It’s all we have, but I hope it's enough.”

She picked up the pouch and looked inside. It was filled to the brim with gold coins. “I don’t require compensation,” she said, tossing it over to the boy that was standing near them, the one who had brought over the money.

“Besides, this was my redemption. I’m not really a good person,” said Virago between spoonfuls of food. She was thinking back to all the people she had killed before, thinking back to the slaughter of Folsele. If these people only knew. “You’re a good person Molly. There aren’t many out there who would like you.”

Corvus groaned sitting up now. “So she’s the reason I’m alive?” Virago shrugged. “More or less. He didn’t even want to come,” she said pointing over to Auxy, who struggled to respond back. Corvus laughed. “Well either way, thank you all.”

The others helped Corvus sit. They cleaned him off and gave him a good plate to eat. Everyone sat around the fire now, only after making sure there was no chance of them getting attacked again that night. They started talking about the adversities in the woods. Everyone

laughed when Virago retold Fedor's actions throughout the battle. He nodded sheepishly, feeling proud he had gone out into the woods in the first place. Corvus was shocked when he found out how close he was to dying. If Virago hadn't jumped at the right time, they may all be dead. And not a single soul could believe it when Auxy tried to convince them that he killed the scolopendra. They must have laughed and talked for hours, because the sun began to peek over the horizon and over the mountains near Belveyon.

"Well I best take my leave," said Virago getting up. She still had to track down the deviant. And if that meant going into Endridge, the heart of the enemies, then so be it. "Already?" remarked Amara. "You're our savior. We could afford to aid you on your journey at least to Belveyon."

"I'm afraid I must insist. Though I cannot thank you enough for your hospitality." In that instance, Virago heard the bark of a hound and a horse approaching. Every squinted off in the distance. Dust rose towards the sky as they saw an approaching silhouette on horseback. In front of it was a dog running in bounds towards the camp.

Virago raised her hand to black out the sun and see who it was, and as soon as she saw, she knew it was trouble. "Oh no. Gylbard how could you," she whispered. It was a tracker. There was always a tracker sent out ahead before a battalion arrived to take out a target. Gylbard wanted her dead. This meant the deviant was in Endridge already.

The man approached and stepped off of his horse, the dog barking loudly and making circles around Virago. "General Virago, I have come for you. You know I am, don't you?." She did. It was the knock of death on her doorstep. She wasn't even afraid for her life, but shattered

about Gylbard. They had grown up together. Even when her father had died, he'd been there. Every point along the way he had been there with her. And he wanted her dead now?

"There must be some kind of mistake," said Virago, practically pleading for there to be one. "I'm afraid the orders came from the Chancellor himself. No wready your sword. This day, either I shall bring back your head or die trying."

"Miss Molly what is this man talking about?" said Auxy making his way over to her, the rest of camp following. The rider laughed. "Molly? She hasn't told you who she, has she? This is general Virago, the founder of the first international Viserwen battalion. The slaughterer of enemies. Viserwen's pride, but now its failure. You let the deviant get away didn't you?"

Everyone's eyes were on Virago now. "Viserwen? Like from the northern kingdom?" said Fedor, catching on a little bit after everyone else as to what was happening. They all started murmuring looking at her. "I won't fight you," said Virago again, trying to stand a little taller but holding on to her sides all the same. "I just fought off a scolopendra, do you really consider it honorable to duel me in this state?"

"The way I see it, this is leveling the playing field." With this, he swung high, bringing the blade down to Virago's head before she had the time, or strength to parry the attack. As soon as he brought the blade up high, Auxy kicked the man on the side of his leg sending him back.

"What the hell are you doing? She's Viserwen! They killed you forefathers in previous battles. The general of their forces is standing right in front of you and you protect her?"

Virago blinked a few times looking at Auxy's face as well. She had lied to them, withheld who she really was. Her father himself had fought in the continental war and murdered innocent people of the western continent. Why were they protecting her?



“We don’t know much about that,” said Fedor, standing up next to Auxy. “But she did save my friend’s life, granted nearly killing me in the process.” Virago smiled looking at the campers. His face was scrunched up in anger at the man.

“Well congratulations, you’ve all just become enemies to the nation of Viserwen. When the battalion arrives, you’ll die with your friend here.” he said, picking himself back up, readying his sword. This was going to be a bloodbath.

But, more and more of the people stood up and got in front of Virago. Amara put a hand over her shoulder and Corvus smiled at her, stepping up the man as well. “You’re all fools. You’ll all die at our hands. Nothing can save you now!” The rider backed away in fear, getting on his horse and leaving, with the dog in bounds behind him.

They all turned to look at Virago, who was broken and lost. Her whole life had been dedicated to helping and serving Gylbard in any way that she could. Even the fighting and killing had been for him. They were friends. He was ready to have her killed for letting the deviant get away? Just like that, in an instant? She had nowhere to go. It felt as if there was nothing left for her in this world anymore.

“Virago, is it?” said Auxy stepping up. “You’re a general. Well ain’t that something.” he smiled at her. “You... you don’t want to kill me too?” she said, more confused than before. “Kill you? You saved our lives. We couldn’t be more grateful. And as for what that man told us, I trust you’ve made some poor decisions in your life, but I know you’re a good person. You helped us and that’s enough.”

“Gybard... the Chancellor, was my friend. I obeyed his commands with my every move. I have never wanted to fight in wars. Or hurt. But I did, for him. And now -,” Virago was cut off by Amara. “Hush now. It’s okay. You’re with us.”

Virago stood up, staring at the camp with teary eyes. “I have done some horrible things in my life. Things I’m not proud of. And I’m seeing that now, but I promise, for as long as I live, there isn’t a single soul that will be able to hurt any one of you.”

Corvus stepped up now. “If you are willing to change your mind now, I’m sure you’re still not planning to go to Eslov.” Virago let out a laugh between tears. “I would be honored to join you all to... Belveyon was it?”

### **CHAPTER 13: War has Begun**

Treva balanced carefully on the edge of the ledge, her arms spread out to keep balance, carefully placing one foot in front of the other. They were on a tour of the castle. From what the crazy wizard had said, she was a vital part of the mission and was going to be the one to unite the kingdoms of the western continent, which sounded fun.

“Now don’t think that just because I’m doing this because I want to. My mother is making me, no matter how much I pleaded,” said Sable, loud enough so that the whole lot of them could hear. Treva was very close to punching her, but that would probably get them in a lot of trouble.

Behind her, Venny was following along the ledge, trying to keep up with Treva’s pace, but was unable to, as she kept falling off the sides. “How are you so good at this?”

“When you’re trying to outrun store merchants, you pick up some agility along the way,” said Treva, making Venny laugh.

Ahead, Curmo was looking around the whole place with curiosity. “So was this really the first kingdom ever built in the western continent?” The stone arches that towered over them looked as if they were about twenty years ahead of the rest of the kingdoms. Everything was built with such precision and looked so clean that it was hard to believe that it was so old.

“Why do you care so much, it’s just a stupid castle?” said Colin who was walking in strides with Sable up ahead. Curmo raised his eyebrows at him, before looking around. No one really seemed to care anymore about the kids’ remarks, they were used to them by now.

“I knew we hit a new low when we took in a bunch of peasants,” Sable responded, laughing. “Oh ya?” said Treva, jumping off of her ledge and making her way over to Sable. “Well if we’re just peasants how come the wizard told us-,” she began, but was immediately cut off by Mites.

“Uhhh, sorry she doesn’t know what she’s saying,” he jumped in, mustering a smile. He then leaned in towards Treva and said, “We’re not supposed to tell anyone remember? At least not yet. That’s what the wizard said.”

“I don’t care what that old crone said to you,” responded Colin. “He’s so old and dumb anyway.” Every word he said reeked with hate and sarcasm. As they continued on the path why came into a large clearing. This must have been on the Easter end of the castle because they hadn’t seen it on their way into the castle. It was a large open field with a path circling around it. There were beautiful white mares grazing in the center of the white circle. The grass itself seemed to glitter. The water rushed to either side of them and they could feel the water and the

mist of the river splash on their faces. The Eastern facing edge of the castle jutted out of the ground with a giant tower. There was a slow moss growing on it, clawing up and forward, but it didn't look even a bit untidy. Even the smallest little rock seemed a spectacle. There were people tending to the animals and the land. Beautiful gazebos and ornate decorations were placed throughout. It immediately warmed Curmo's heart to be here now.

"Aaand, this is the grounds where we hold parties and what-not," said Sable, sounding bored. "Venny and her dumb friends are here often too." "Hey," shouted Venny from the back. "My friends aren't dumb!" This got a laugh out of Colin.

"Hey, you guys should follow us over there. We have a fun surprise planned for you," said Sable, pointing over to the other gazebo at the far corner of the field. It looked boarded up and slightly closed off from the rest of the place.

The party looked surprised amongst each other. A surprise, from her? That didn't seem very likely overall. "Oh come on, I know we got off on the wrong foot, but me and Sable just want to make it up to you!" Cloin chimed in, trying to convince them.

Akuldra shrugged and started following, the rest of the party behind him. He hadn't been talking much throughout the tour. He didn't want to say anything to disrespect the royal family, but it had been getting very tempting recently. This had better be one hell of a surprise.

They approached the structure and saw that it was cast slightly darker as well. "You all should go inside. That's where the surprise is," said Sable, ushering the party inside, along with Venny.

"Hey! Stop pushing. Wait, why am I following them too?" As soon as everyone was in, Sable pushed back the boarded door behind them, leaving everyone in the dark. It was a damp

room, with no light and there was something at their feet. “NOOO ITS SNAKES!!!!” shouted Felix, jumping up, screaming. Outside, they could hear the siblings laughing.

“What!? Get me out of here!” said Treva, pulling against the door, which would no longer budge. They could hear the low hiss of the snakes now, as they felt their slimy bodies against their legs. Each further moment risked a venomous bite.

“They’re everywhere!” shouted Bella, trying to move back, but only finding herself running into more of the snakes.

“Everyone just calm down for a second,” said Akuldra, feeling around the room. There had to be a way out, there was no way the door wouldn’t budge at all. He pulled at the knob as hard as he could, but it eventually broke off, leaving the door still closed.

“Hey you two,” said Akuldra, over the sound of the hissing. “Open this door right now or you have literally no idea what I’m going to do to you.” This made them laugh even more.

“Oh my god it's trying to climb up my leg!” shouted Curmo, flinching and jumping up and down, trying to shake the creature off of him.

“Alright this is not looking good,” said Akuldra, turning around to look at what he assumed was the rest of them. “The door is closed in by magic. Actually, there might be a way, hold on.” With this he closed his eyes and focused all his energy in his hands. If his years as a deviant had taught him anything. It was that brute strength and power could be used to escape most situations.

“Ya if you could hurry up with that, that would be great,” said Mites, trying to conceal his fear, but not doing an overall good job at it. “Everyone, shut up,” said Akuldra, trying to concentrate.

He felt the energy coursing through his veins as he concentrated hard towards his arm, before hitting the door with all his might. The whole foundation of the structure rumbled with his sheer force and power. Outside, they heard Sable and Clon stop laughing as they ran away from the place. This man was dangerous, and they didn't want to be around if he managed to get out.

Although, even with all this, the door didn't budge. It was held back by some really powerful magic. "I can't believe they would do this to us... to me!" said Venny, almost brought to tears. "Hey, calm down," said Treva, making her way through the piles of snakes to Venny now. "Just breathe okay, calm down and breathe." Venny nodded, slowing her breathing as she held onto Treva's hand. "Wow, Treva is actually being nice to someone, this place is magical," remarked Mites with a snicker. He didn't even have to see to know that Treva was glaring at him.

"Hey boy, you can do something about snakes can't you?" said Akuldra, still looking around to see if there was anyway for them to get out. "Well no," said Felix, standing on one leg. "What makes you think I can do anything?"

"I was obviously talking to the green one you dolt," remarked Akuldra shaking his head. "Oh ya," responded Bella. "Curmo, do some of the Pertur magic thingy and make the snakes leave us alone!"

"But I don't know how to do that!" said Curmo. "Well you didn't know how to fly a drag either did you?" said Bella. "Wait you've flown a dragon!" said Venny, quickly forgetting how scared she was for a second. "You know what nevermind that's a conversation for another time."

"She's right boy. I know you're weak and not too sharp-witted, but try something." said Akuldra. That didn't exactly make Curmo feel better but he breathed slowly, closing his eyes and slowly reaching down. He tried using the trick that Malarkey had shown him, to concentrate his

powers. To feel the magic course from the very soil into his hand. For a moment, it was working, he could feel the snakes stop hissing as much and they all started moving over towards the edge of the building. But that's when his mind immediately went to Sable and Colin. Those horrid children had trapped them with snakes. With no way out. What kind of treatment was that? His blood started boiling with anger as he thought about what would have happened if one of them had gotten bit. What if he had gotten bit? What if Bella had gotten bit? He started thinking about Venny crying in the corner of the room and Akuldra yelling at him. He started thinking about the northern kingdoms invading and wait... his parents were alive, and they hadn't come back for him!

Emotions welled up inside his gut, and suddenly, the energy he was taking in immediately shot back. He shouted out with an enormous scream, but that's not how it came out. He yelled with a roar. A deafening, low, and furious roar. The foundation of the building began to crumble and the entire thing shot off in all different directions with a loud bang. The snakes were shot off to the walls and slithered away, but Curmo's magic didn't stop. The ground kept on shaking and started cracking down the center. He could feel his energy draining, and fast, but he didn't care. It was almost all too much.

Suddenly, he felt a cold and sharp feeling erupt in the middle of his chest and he was immediately blown back, as he watched the world spin around him before he eventually crashed into the ground, the dust picking up around him. As he opened his eyes, he saw what it was that had shot him. It had been Pruden, who stood in front of them now, his typical smile no longer there. In its stead was a concerned look. He saw his friends, backing up away from him, scared for what he had done, for what he was.

He looked at the wizard confused, who held a hand, to ensure no one approached him. Slowly but surely, Curmo's eyes closed as the wizard was upon him. He closed his eyes. His last thought of his parents. Smiling at him right before they left for Eslov, saying, "we'll be together soon." His world faded into a slow darkness as sleep overtook him. A single tear fell out of his left eye.

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When he came to, there was that horrible feeling and aching again that he had felt when he had. But this time, there was also fear, not of the snakes, not of anything else that he had seen in the past few days, but of himself.

His focus began to come back as the bright white light around him slowly dimmed. He was back in Pruden's room, on the couch. The wizard was standing across from him, his back turned. He was brewing something that smelled delicious, maybe some soup. Curmo groaned as he tried to sit up. This time, the feeling was a little better than last time. The wizard must have helped him.

"I was wondering how long you'd be out for." said the wizard, making his way over to Curmo, lying him back down again. "No no, not yet. You need to rest."

"What happened back there, I can barely remember?" said Curmo. "Is... did anyone get hurt?" Curmo was afraid he might have struck someone by accident, but the wizard reassured him, shaking his head. "You didn't hurt anyone. Everyone went back to their chambers after the incident safe and sound. You boy, are no ordinary being. There is something inside you that



commands power and I have never seen anything like it.” The wizard was smiling, thinking back to the gazebo. “I was standing outside to see how you all would manage to get out. I thought that Akuldra would eventually realize the ceiling had a hatch on it. But this was not something I predicted. Do you remember what I said when I first met all of you? I had told you that I had been expecting to meet all of you. Because I had. I had waited for over a hundred years to finally meet all six of you. But I had also told you that the future was now completely uncertain. This is true as well. I cannot see any further boy. And if I do, it could be a lie.”

Curmo’s head was spinning. What was the wizard trying to say? “I’m sorry I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.” The wizard nodded, giving Curmo the bowl.

“The future had always been crystal clear to me. That’s now i had known about every attack the northern kingdom was going to make for the first continental war. It had been a gift granted to the three wizard’s during our creation. Although, that power stopped working after our interaction earlier today. Even a hundred years ago, I wasn’t able to see beyond that very same interaction. There was something about you six, and now I know exactly what that is. Curmo, you have magic stronger than I have ever seen.”

“I mean how strong can that be? All I did was shake the gazebo a little bit,” said Curmo confused. He had never felt that he was that strong or powerful. What was this man trying to say. The wizard chuckled, helping Curmo to his feet. “Follow me,” he said, leading Curmo to the window overlooking the western field they had seen earlier.

Curmo could scarcely believe what he was seeing. In place of the structure, there was a large gashing hold in the ground, leading to a black Abyss below. Cracks in the very ground stretched out from it like roots. The entire structure had been swallowed up by the earth. It must

have opened up after everyone had been escorted off of the grounds, hopefully. Not only that, but the clouds right about this pit were swirling around in a perfect circle. There was an unnatural scene about the area. Curmo could see children running up the place and looking down into the abyss, before quickly being ushered away by some of the servants.

Curmo gulped looking back at Pruden. “Did... did I do that?” he asked, unsure. “Yes Curmo, you and you alone. As soon the last person was off of the ground, it caved in to form that gash. I have no idea how you did it boy, but i do hope to.”

“And how do you plan to do that? Like I said, I didn’t even know I could do magic until Akuldra told me. I have literally no idea what kind of magic I have.”

“There is something I’d like to try. I can enter your mind Curmo. I can see inside your very thoughts and hence into your very being,” said Pruden. Curmo raised his eyebrows. “See inside me? Oh boy, I think I’d like to do that just as much as you.”

“There’s just one more thing. You can come in now!” he said over to the door. Bella walked in, giving a wide smile to Curmo as she did. “Curmo! Are you okay?”

“Just fine, I hope I didn’t-,” he started. “No Curmo, we’re fine. You got us out.” He smiled, relieved.

“You were whispering her name in your sleep Curmo,” said Pruden, ushering Bella over to him. Curmo blushed fully realizing he probably would have done that. “Ya, I mean it makes sense. I was worried she got hurt,” said Curmo, trying to defend himself and make the situation less awkward. It wasn’t working. Bella gave him a warm look. She was glad her friend cared so much.

“Of course dear boy, but I thought it wise for her to join us on this journey. With that also the fact that she is now my apprentice, so Bella, consider this your first day of training.”

Pruden took the bowl out of Curmo’s hand again and lay him back down. The wizard placed his own hand on Curmo's forehead and indicated for Bella to do the same. “Alright Curmo. Now just try to relax. The calmer you are, the easier it's going to be to transition into your mind.”

Curmo breathed out and closed his eyes, thinking about something soothing. He thought back to his little home on top of the hill facing the eastern mountains. He thought of the warm and misty sunrises he would wake up to in the summer and when he first met Zenvor at the foot of a mountain just like this. He thought back to his and Bella running through the marketplace streets to see who could get to Malarkey’s shop the first. Whoever it was, always got an extra piece of candy. It was a fun game. Curmo smiled as his mind began to drift.

Slowly, he began to open his eyes, but this time, not to Pruden’s room, but to his own back in Belveyon. He saw the mountains he had been imagining, the tallest ones caked in snow. Was he back. Had everything he had seen been a dream? Had he even left Belveyon? He rushed outside, to find Pruden and Bella looking around. Instead of the village, the whole sky and the ground was black and empty. There was only the small hill and the mountains on the right.

“Ah Curmo, there you are. Where are we if I may ask?” said Pruden looking around a little confused. “Oh,” chimed in Bella, “this is Belveyon. Curmo’s thinking of home.”

“But we’re not actually there. Is this in my mind?” Pruden nodded approaching Curmo now. “Yes boy, we have entered your mind. This is the exact thing you were thinking of when we entered. But like you said, you have no idea what the source of your magic truly is, so we’re

going to have to enter the literal pits of your mind. We are going to dive from your conscious to your subconscious. This is going to be rough so hold on to something”

“Wait what-,” started Curmo, but wasn’t able to finish his sentence before his house started to crumble and the mountains started crashing down. “Wizard what’s happening!” The ground beneath them began to crack open before suddenly they were all free falling in complete darkness.

“AHHHH!” Bella and Curmo shouted in unison. It wasn’t long before they began to slow down as they came to a stop at the bottom of some kind of deep pit. “Haha that’s always fun,” said Pruden as he lowered the two to the ground and brushed himself off. There was a small light ahead of them, near a door. It was a typical oak door, but it looked eerie, almost frightening. “Ah a door,” said the wizard. “You know the entrance to everyone’s subconscious is different. Some people have a gate, an opening, but you have a door.” He moved over to it and turned the knob, which wouldn’t budge.

The wizard sighed, looking back at Curmo. “And yours is locked as well. You’re hiding something. You probably don’t even know what it is. Come here boy, I need you to open the door. It won’t allow us to look in unless you let us in.”

Curmo stared up at the wizard still confused. What was happening. They were in his head and were about to enter into his subconscious. And there was a literal door here? He sighed standing up, brushing himself off as well as he made his way to the door. Everything about it seemed ordinary, except there were small scratch marks at the bottom corner of the door, maybe something had been trying to get in, or something else out...

He put his hand on the knob, turning back to the others. Bella nodded, saying, “you got this Curmo.” Pruden was stroking his moustache raising one eyebrow, waiting for Curmo to open it. Heaving a large sigh, he faced the door and turned the knob, which opened easily for him and pushed open the door.

On the other side, there was a bright light emitted. The sun was high in the sky, it was the middle of the day, wherever they were. Curmo went in first, Bella behind him, and finally Pruden, who had to walk sideways, as to not get his moustache caught on the door. As the light dimmed, he could see clearly where it was.

“Curmo this is the annual Belveyon fair!” chimed Bella looking around excitedly. There were vendor stands all over the place selling large meats and foods she’d never even heard of before. There were fun smells in the air and the clearing was room for plenty of horses to roam. There was not a single person in sight though. “Welcome Curmo, to your subconscious. This is probably a place you feel pretty safe. But what’s there to hide here?”

Curmo looked around confused before he realized exactly which fair this was. “Oh no. Hey can we just move on to find out what’s inside me? We don’t have to worry about this place too much.”

“Curmo listen to me,” said Pruden. “If there is something here that you need to tell us about, we’re going to find it one way or another.”

“Curmo what are you even hiding?” said Bella looking over at him confused. His heart skipped a beat as she asked this. There was no way they could know. Not now, not like this. “Nothing important, I can assure you,” he replied, trying to move off the grounds of the fair, looking around for anything conspicuous.

“Look, what’s over there,” said Pruden pointing to the back of one of the merchant stalls. Curmo looked back terrified. He could see a small head behind the stall. He knew exactly who that was. That was him. Just a couple of years ago at the fair. This scene was one that constantly played in his mind.

They started walking over to younger Curmo. “That’s you, isn’t it?” said Pruden. “And look over there,” he pointed over behind another stall. Bella was standing there, talking to some of the villager kids. “Oh ya! I remember this day. It was the first time I ever rode a horse. Curmo, you taught me remember!” Curmo nodded sickly as they approached him.

“Can... can I see us?” he asked, cautiously approaching himself. “Relax boy, the people here aren’t real. This is like a scene in a play, except it actually happened.” They confidently approached younger Curmo now, who was bobbing his green head out the side, trying to see what Bella was doing. She was laughing at one of the villager’s jokes. His face was scrunched up in frustration and confusion.

“Curmo you said you left for a job Malarkey had sent you to. What were you still doing in the fair?” commented Bella. Something wasn’t adding up just right. Just then, they saw what Curmo was doing. He was holding a note in his hands. His hands were trembling, not unlike the real Curmo, who was scared they would see exactly what was written on it.

Suddenly, younger Curmo shook his head, crumbling up the paper, and ran away from the stall. Pruden, Bella, and Curmo stared at the crumbled note now. “I know what you’re thinking, but that might not be such a good idea right now,” said Curmo, probably to no avail.

Pruden and Bella looked at each other, shrugged, and picked up the paper. Curmo awkwardly backed away, turning around. “Oh god,” he said, biting his lower lip. Pruden and

Bella were silent, reading what the paper read, and after a moment, turned around to face Curmo who was blushing now.

“Well, I am an ancient being of great renown, but I hate to say, I never saw this coming,” remarked Pruden, smiling. Bella looked at Curmo confused. “You never told me,” she said softly.

The paper, as Curmo knew, was him telling Bella that he loved her. That he always had and that he always would. But it was out now, she knew. Bella knew that he loved her.

“I’m sorry, I just thought that, well we’re friends... but I never knew. And I didn’t think-” but before he could finish his thought, Bella rushed over and hugged him. Curmo gulped, awkwardly hugging her back. What was happening? “Oh Curmo you idiot, I’ve always liked you too. I thought you knew!” She remarked. Curmo felt elevated, excited and confused at the same time. All these years. All this time they’d been such good friends and was it really true?

She smiled at him now, teary eyed, and Curmo could see his own reflection in her large blue eyes. This was it. This was the moment he’d been waiting for for years, but never once thought it would arrive. Slowly, they both leaned in, closing their eyes, as Bella and Curmo tried to kiss

At that moment, they suddenly heard a loud roar from around the corner. Pruden ran back and dived to the ground, pulling the kids down with him, as a blast of fire roared right at the spot they were just standing.

“WHAT IS THAT!” shouted Curmo, between rapid breaths. They all stood with their backs to the cart, looking around the corner, but whatever had been there was hiding too. “Um, well I have no idea,” said Pruden. “This is a genuine shock. It is possible though, that you have some kind of curse? But only mages can place curses. What’s happening right now?”

They heard the roar again and the barn at the far end of the fair suddenly burst into flames and they saw a dark silhouette reveal itself from the shadows. It was the shape of a man, but completely black, its whole body covered in some kind of dark goo. It was staring directly at Curmo, with what seemed like a wide grin on its face.

“Pruden, what’s going on,” said Bella, making eye contact with the creature, who was slowly approaching them now. “Ohhhh that’s not good,” said Pruden, seeing the dark figure. “Ummm, okay really quickly, before we die, boy did you know who your father was?”

“I remember his face, but nothing much else. He wasn’t a Pertur, if that’s what you’re asking. We need to get out of here!”

“Alright children, listen to me good, when I give the word, I need you to run. Okay now RUN!!” Pruden jumped out from behind the counter and ran behind the kids, keeping their heads low. The blast of fire came again, and Curmo could feel the heat from the blast, but he hadn’t gotten hurt. They ran through the door and closed it behind them lightly, going once again into complete darkness. The beast started clawing at the bottom of the door, trying to get out, its long fingernails scratching away at the wood. The world around them started crashing again as they started falling even lower into the pit.

Curmo started spinning in all directions, wind whipping across his face. He let the fall take over and let it toss him all directions. And as soon as it had started, it was over. Curmo jolted up on the couch, Bella and Pruden waking up with him.

“Oh my god! Pruden are you okay?” asked Bella. His back was scorching and slow smoke was rising from him. “I’ll be okay, children. Don’t worry I can heal myself just fine. I’m just glad we managed to get out of there.”



“Open the door right NOW!” came a voice from behind the door, it was a young girl.

“Treva?” said Curmo, making his way to the door. As he opened it, Treva, Mites, Akuldra, and Felix all spilled in their faces covered in sweat and they were panning, hands on their legs.

“What happened to you?” asked Bella. “There’s been an attack sir,” Mites managed to say. Pruden’s face dropped and he rushed over to the window. “Umm he does know he got burned right,” said Treva quietly over to Curmo, who nodded.

Outside the window, he saw what they all seemed so scared of. Outside, there were monsters running through the streets. He saw Dentron on horseback, giant egants smashing houses, and small slithering creatures bursting into hoses and carrying out the people. There was a panic as everyone was running all over the place.

The wizard quickly grabbed his wand and aimed it straight out the window. A bright white light emerged from it, creating a large dome around Endridge. “Woah,” said Treva, as she saw the soft white light encapsulate the whole kingdom. It truly was a spectacle.

“We need to send in the forces. I know they aren’t trained but this is the only thing we can do. Akuldra and Mites, do down and lead the men. Bella, you need to stay here and help me. Curmo and Felix, you two need to get out of the kingdom as fast as you can, as do you Treva. Curmo and Treva, pick up those maps lying on that bench over there.”

They both turned around to find two parchments sitting side by side on the counter. One had a C labeled on it, and the other a T. They picked up their maps to see what was inside. For Curmo, it was the journey to some island labeled with a question mark at the Eastern side. For Treva, it was a map to Enacreon, leading to Fortis and Prigg, before going back inland towards Lyntra, Tenelia, and back home to Endridge.

“I don’t have much time to explain everything to you, and I really wish I did, but I am blind to the future now. So you all need to trust me, I know it might be hard, but we can make it. We will make it. I’ve awaited meeting you for so long, and I didn’t know we’d be saying goodbye so soon. Chances are, I’ll never meet you three ever again, so good luck out there. Make Endridge proud.”

Curmo, Felix, and Treva nodded. Curmo and Bella approached each other, the sound of the chaos getting fainter in the background. They stared into each other’s eyes, scared, and hurt. “So soon...” whispered Bella. Curmo nodded, and kissed her one more time, probably the last time for a long time. “Don’t die out there,” said Bella as Curmo smiled, nodding. “You too.”

They turned to see the whole party staring at them, the king had entered the room and was staring wide eyed as well. “Wait, but I thought... never mind. Pruden what are we going to do?”

“Get the forces outside as fast as possible. And give these six whatever they need. They’re our last hope now.” The king nodded gravely, turning around to go downstairs, the resort of the party following suit. They shuffled down the staircase, the sound of a raging battle just outside. “Curmo, you never told me that you and Bella-,” started Treva, smiling mischievously. “Ya well we have more important things to worry about,” Felix cut in sharply. Curmo nodded, glad Felix understood. Treva just shrugged moving forward.

“Alright your majesty, send out a battalion with both me and Mites. We’ll need to get these three kids out of the kingdom. I’ll escort Felix and Curmo out and we’ll make our way to the equex. Mites get Treva out and send her off with a battalion. She shouldn’t travel alone. Listen we need to move fast before the exits get closed up so make your goodbyes now.”

“You remind me of your father Akuldra,” said the king smiling at the boy who’d grown up so fast. Akuldra nodded. “Oh and one more thing,” King Locke chimed in. “Can I send off my children with you as well?” Akuldra sighed, really wanting to say no, but responded saying, “Sure, get them down here to meet. We’ll be leaving soon. The war has begun.”

The king rushed off, sending people off to retrieve the royal children and two small battalions. “So I guess this it then,” said Treva looking at the rest of the party, her eyes eventually landing on Mites, who was smiling down at her. “Honestly, I don’t know if I can do this,” she said, unsure.

“Treva,” responded Mites, coming over to her and placing his hands on her shoulders. “Do you remember back when it was just you and me living on the streets? We didn’t know anyone or anything? You’re the one that found the others. You’re the one that binds us together. You were the leader and the glue. There aren’t many people in this world that can do what you’re about to do, but you don’t really even need to believe in yourself, because I believe in you.”

He smiled hugging her, Treva allowing tears to fall down her cheek. There weren’t many people in the world she was afraid of losing. In fact, she’d thought about killing a few of her siblings from time to time, but Mites was the only one who was there for her when no one else was. Now she was being forced to say goodbye.

Now Akuldra looked over at Curmo. “Well boy, it's been great fun being around you, even though we seemed to almost die at every point along the way, and you weren’t the best help.” Curmo signed, frowning. Even though they were saying goodbye, Akuldra couldn’t help but insult him one last time. “But, you do have strength in you. You are resilient and powerful, maybe even more than I am. So if there is anyone that can get to the third wizard before the

northern forces, it's you. And I trust Felix will be there for you at every step along the way.”

Felix smiled nodding. “Good luck out there Curmo.”

He had said Curmo’s name. He hadn’t called him boy, or idiot, or kid or anything. He had called him by his name. Curmo smiled at him, for the first time, not hating Akuldra.

“Well boys, it's been great knowing ya,” said Treva, looking over at the others. “We’ve had quite a ride. I think I’m going to miss you most of all,” she said pointing at Felix, who didn’t look away this time. The others laughed.

“Thanks for helping us Treva. I’ll miss you too.” he said with a genuine smile. King Locke then approached with around fifty men in his stead. Next to him were the royal children, Sable, Colin, and Venny. They looked frightened for the first time since Treva had seen them, and it warmed her heart to see it.

“I have everything you asked for Akuldra. The children are here as well. I can send my son Colin with the party heading south. He has journeyed with me to the Enacreon kingdom many times. He knows the king and should be of help,” Locke explained. “And I want my girls heading west. I need them to be as far away from all this as possible.” Akuldra nodded as Locke looked at his children one last time. “Be safe, and stay out of trouble. I know I haven’t had time to prepare you for any war, but I trust you’ll be safe with these children and the guards I’m sending with you.”

The kids looked at him, crying as well. “We’ll miss you daddy,” said Sable, hugging her father. Curmo raised his eyebrows at this. Maybe she wasn’t a complete monster after all. Then Colin joined in, as did Venny. The four of them stood there, hugging each other, before Locke finally said, “Now go, and make Endridge proud.”

Akuldra was off to the side, instructing the guards on what he wanted them to do. The clumsily formed a small arc ahead of him as Akuldra sighed. This was going to be much worse without trained soldiers. “All right, stay in between the men. Keep low and keep out of sight. Do you understand?”

They all nodded grimly, looking back one last time. The foundation of the castle was starting to crumble as well as the whole structure shook with every new monster banging on the doors, or smashing into the walls.

“Alright,” said Akuldra, indicating to the two groups he had formed. “On my word, I want you all to go through that door. If everything works out fine, your rides should be available just across that way,” he pointed about a block away from the northern bridge of the castle. “Once we’re outside the northern gates, regroup again and count heads. Once everyone is accounted for, I want you to ride and don’t look back. We’ll all be okay here.”

Curmo sighed, thinking about everything. He tried clearing his head, but that was hard knowing that his face could be smashed in at any moment once he stepped outside these doors. “And once everyone is out of the city, me and Mites will lead both squadrons into their positions. I don’t want to see a single body fall today, is that clear.” The guards stayed silent, fumbling around with their armour. “I said, IS THAT CLEAR!” The soldiers jumped up slightly, responding with a low uproar. Good enough.

“Alright on my count. Three... two... one... GO!” They all screamed barging out the door. Curmo kept his head low as he ran out behind the guards into the broad daylight. There was smoke rising from the debris all around them. A low dust had taken over the city as to barely allow them to see a few feet ahead. He could hear the roars and screams from the monsters and

people alike. The guards from around the city had fled their posts and regrouped at the main gates of the castle. Everything was chaotic. Curmo could see the shield that the wizard had put up was already beginning to deteriorate. He was weaker than before. Much weaker.

Sailing columns flew over their heads as Akuldra led them into the quiet of a wide alley. They were so close yet so far from their destination, but Akuldra kept his hand up, indicating for everyone to be as silent as possible. And now Curmo could see why as an Egant approached the front of the alley, looking ahead of him. It was a hideous giant creature, towering over the top of buildings. It had a large body and looked sickly pale. The beast had warts and bumps covering him and whenever it opened its mouth, it let out a horrible groaning sound. On its head were two eyes, looking independent about him, trying to spot its next prey. Even for its impressive composure, the creature's limbs were strong and large. It was the perfect giant killing machine.

It suddenly dawned on Curmo, as he noticed this beast, that the soul of an Egant resided in Akuldra's own body. In the frame of a human, he stored the strength and power of that creature. How was he able to contain it?

As he was thinking this, the beast shuffled to his right, moving straight into the alleyway. Everyone tensed up as he narrowed its eyes, and Curmo could swear he saw the creature grin for just a moment as he saw they were caught. Akuldra groaned stepping forward. He walked ahead of everyone and made eye contact with the beast.

The Egant flashed its red eyes wide, looking straight at Akuldra with confusion. It felt as if it were one of its own but all he saw was a small creature. Treva shot Curmo a sideways glance. They were all wondering the same thing. What was going to happen now?

Akuldra opened his mouth and let out a loud, low, groaning sound.

“GGGGUUEEAAAHHHEAAA.” The beast responded with making its own sound, responding to Akudra. Although, it immediately shook its head, taking a menacing step forward and letting out another sound, louder and more harsh.

“Akudra what’s happening, can you talk to it?” Curmo whispered, stepping forward. “I thought I could, but I guess our prediction was right. The beasts are being controlled in some way. It won’t listen to me. Stand back.”

Curmo stepped back, falling back in line with the rest of them. “What did he say?” Sable asked, shivering from fear. Her face was in complete shock as she stared up at the beast. All the children regrouped at the end, looking to Curmo for answers. “The creature is being controlled. It won’t listen. There’s going to be a fight.” Venny gulped, clutching to Treva’s clothes. She held Venny tightly, covering her eyes. “Well, this should end nicely.”

The beast let out a roar now, storming directly towards everyone. Sable let out a scream and the guards readied their weapons, although Curmo was unsure how ready they would be to use them. Akudra jumped up, with incredible, unforeseeable speed, landing a punch directly in the creature’s gut before it could take another step forward. The Egant stumbled back, wavering for a moment, before falling straight back, hitting its head on the cobblestone path, completely unconscious. Akudra closed his eyes and stepped down on one knee, placing a hand over the creature’s head before standing back up. “Alright, now that he’s dealt with, we need to move.” Everyone was staring at him wide eyed. He had punched out an Egant in one hit without even trying much. Who was this man?

They started following him towards their rides as they finally approached the carriages. As soon as Akuldra had given the word, the guards had gotten the carriages ready and stocked them food and money. A whole lot of money. "Alright Felix, you need to take Hippo. Colin, was it, take the royal carriage. I presume you know how to ride." He nodded grimly, stepping up to the carriage and manning the reins.

"There's a slight change of plans. I won't be able to send anyone with you. Right now, getting out as fast as possible is your best option. Me and Mites need to stay here in Endridge so we won't follow you to the gates, but you'll be fine. Trust me."

Treva nodded one last time at Mite as she started getting onto her carriage, but felt a slight tug. She looked back and saw Venny staring up at her, "Hey, do you think that maybe I could come with you?" Treva raised her eyebrows and looked at the others, who just shrugged and she smiled at Venny. "Sure, I think. If no one really objects to it." Venny went back and hugged Sable. "Bye Sable. I'll really miss you. Stay safe!" Sable looked heartbroken and crushed as she hugged her sister back. All those years, she'd been mean to her, but when it came down to it, they were siblings after all.

Venny quickly followed Treva into her carriage as Felix manned the Equex. "Oh I missed you so much buddy! I hope they treated you all right." he hugged Hippo around his neck. The creature was neighing as he brushed up his head against Felix's body, slightly pushing him aside with just a little bit of force. He was ready to run, at full strength. Curmo stepped up onto his own carriage, giving a hand to Sable, who sarcastically smiled and climbed in herself. Curmo shrugged standing at the door one last time, looking out into the kingdom. The majestic and



beauty of the kingdom had slowly drained to a low hellfire. Everything was drowned by the screeching and yelling of monsters.

“Alright Felix, head out of this gate right here and we’ll head east. It’s time.” Felix nodded, patting his watery friend one last time. “Alright buddy, full gallop out that gate now.” And the creature took off, pushing Curmo and Sable back in their seats. Even Felix was slightly taken aback by the equex’s speed. It seemed to understand they needed to get out as soon as possible. “What the hell kind of beast is this!?” Sable exclaimed, gulping uneasily.

They were going straight through the kingdom, heading directly for the northern gate. All around them, the monsters tried to chase the carriage but were either too slow, or stopped by Mites or Akuldra, who were blocking the rear of the carriages. Behind them, Colin was riding at full speed as well, not keeping up with the equex, but still running pretty fast. Then, Curmo looked up at the castle. From the highest tower, he could see the bright white light from the wizard’s magic as he tried to prevent more of the creatures from entering the kingdom. The large floating buildings began to solely lower to the ground as he directed his magic towards the shield. From the window, Curmo could make out the faint outline of Bella. His heart ached as he thought about their kiss, and he was hoping she could see him as well. He would have to make it back. He would have to make it back for her. Curmo got teary thinking about his wasted years, trying to tell Bella how he felt, but not being able to.

“Woah there buddy be careful!” said Felix from up ahead, snapping Curmo back to reality as they barreled through the north gates, barely running into some three headed creature. They rammed through the front gates, straight through the shield, which I guess allowed you to leave easy enough. The monsters were all thrown back as Felix continued riding at full speed

down the path. The monsters started chasing them for some distance, but stopped when they realized their primary goal was simply getting into Endridge.

Curmo brushed himself off, making his way to the front of the carriage. “Are you okay?” he asked back to Sable, who was staring at her beloved kingdom, which had been overrun so easily. She didn’t hear Curmo as she continued watching the place. Curmo nodded, understanding she wanted to be alone for some time.

He walked out onto the ledge and sat next to Felix, patting him on the shoulder. “Good riding back there. We made it out because of you.” Felix nodded smiling. “Well where are we riding to right now?” Curmo took out his map and pointed to the southeast corner of the continent. I presume we should make our way to Eslov first. This map is really confusing though. It feels as though Pruden has made the directions a lot more complicated than he should have. On the map Curmo was holding, the line stretched from Eslov to the Nero Crescent all the way down to savage island before finally going to the island at the far end of the map. “I trust him Curmo. He is a wizard after all. He probably thought about all the factors before he made this”

Then, Curmo flipped over the map to see the inscription on the other side. “Hey! It says something here!” He looked closer at the paper, trying to make out the words. “What does it say?” Sable asked. She had moved up towards the front of the carriage now, and was leaning over the ledge to get a look at the map. Her voice, though curious, was full of pain. She must have been scared and worried. Curmo could understand the feeling.

“Curmo and Felix. Hope it’s nice weather today. It’s me, Pruden, the wizard. You must be looking at the map probably confused, but don’t worry, I didn’t make a mistake. You see, my brother has hid himself from this world and can only be brought back with a summoning spell. I

know I know, I didn't tell you before because this journey will definitely be perilous. I didn't want to take the chance of discouraging you. When i could foresee the future, I saw only the two of you traveling to retrieve him, so I needed to make sure we were one hundred percent careful with every decision. At the Nero Bay, you need to find the mage Kai. She will direct you to the water abyss where you will need to collect the water from the bottom of the ocean. Then, at your next stop at the archipelago, you will find the scholar Tal. He will help you find the ancient carvings of the air, a naturally formed sculpture at the island of Aquila where you will take a rock from the sculpture. I'd also recommend getting a painting drawn here. It's one hell of a sight. Finally, make your way to the Forest of the Reborn at Savage Island. Here, you will need to collect a branch from the eternal tree. Once you have collected all of this, you will need to find the wise sage Haldor, who will teach you to cast a spell. You will then make your way to my brother and summon him. Try to be nice because he might wake up a little grouchy. Alright good luck then. By the way, hey there Sable!"

Curmo heaved a sigh. "Well, I guess we're headed for the Nero Crescent then." They nodded, riding in silence as the sun began to set under the blanket of darkness.

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On the other side of the Endridge, Treva was struggling to keep the map open on the bumpy road. "Woah, I can't believe we made it out of there alive," exclaimed Venny excitedly, staring off into the distance. "I can't believe it either, considering the lousy riding," mumbled Treva under her breath.

“Hey! This is a lot harder than it looks.” said Colin, slightly hurt by Treva’s words.

“Anyway, it looks like we’re going to be going to Enacreon first. Then the lower peninsula and across all the way to Tenelia before heading back. Oh boy. This is going to take a while.” She flipped over the paper to see some words scrawled on the other side, in pretty bad handwriting.

“Hey it says something here,” she said, leaning in towards Venny so that she could see. “What does it say,” asked Colin from the front. Treva read out the message aloud.

Hello Treva, Colin, and Venny! I hope you're excited for your journey. Like I mentioned earlier, you are to unite the kingdoms of the western continent and bring them back to Endridge to help fight. Your journey will begin in Enacreon and end in Tenelia. Now this task may be difficult to achieve, but I trust you’ll be able to do it just fine. Treva, you need to remember how to talk and convince people. You need to do whatever it takes, even if that means more unconventional methods of convincing, though I’m sure you’ll be more than willing to comply. Some of the nations, like Fortis and Prigg, are in war and are facing their own nation’s problems. You will need to help them in addition to convincing them to lend their army. Once out of Tenelia, bring the army back to Endridge. There shall be a battle for the ages, and you dear Treva, will be leading the armies into it. Stay strong, and understand that you can do it.”

“Well, that’s heavy,” remarked Colin. The wizard hadn’t spared even the slightest bit of truth. Treva maybe had the most difficult job of any of the six. “I… I just don’t know,” said Treva quietly. I mean she was just a street urchin who stole to survive. How was she supposed to unite the kingdoms.

Venny patted her hand. “It’s okay. We can do it. And you don’t have to believe in yourself, because I believe in you.” Treva took in a sharp breath, remembering Mite’s words. Well alright then.

“So, Enacreon then? It’s a great place. Their castle isn’t as big as ours, obviously, but it’s alright either way. And don’t worry about convincing the king. I’ve talked to him plenty, and we can get the job done easy,” said Colin. Wow, the world had really turned around. Colin was being nice for once. Treva smiled. At least she wasn’t alone. Staring back at the hurting kingdom of Endridge, she faced the royal children again. “Don’t worry about Endridge. I’m sure those monsters will all be gone by tomorrow’s sunrise and everything will be okay.” she said, hugging Venny. “And so will we,” Treva said, under her breath, maybe for the first time believing it.

Back at home... the king starred with water in his eyes as he saw his kingdom fall in front of him. Everything they had worked to build. Anger began erupting inside him once more. “You’ve done it, Gylbard. The war has begun.”

#### **CHAPTER 14: Chancellor’s Game**

The air around them was bright as Gylbard and his men marched onward across the grassy plains. Behind them lay the ruins of the once precious town of Folsele, practically burned to the ground. They had taken all they could and started moving on. Once they had conquered the Eastern seaboard of the continent, Gylbard would be able to move on to getting the third wizard, ending his life before he could end Gylbard’s.

This thought carried in the chancellor’s mind as he trudged along the path, his feet getting muddy and dirty with each progressive step. From what he had heard, it wasn’t long before they

were in a village called Belveyon. He would be able to restock up there. Gylbard looked back with pride towards his army. Behind him, tens of thousands of men were marching in lines with precision in their each and every step. The thunderous rumbling of the ground with each passing step was something to be marveled at. Suddenly, Gylbard felt a push from behind him.

“Move it! I don’t want you slowing down!” Gylbard nodded, apologetically before slightly speeding up to match pace with the others in his row. Looking up ahead, he could see around around six carriages being pulled along the front of the road. One of them was supposed to be his, but Gylbard knew he could never risk getting caught. Not when he was so close to defeating destiny itself. He had disguised himself as a Peridonian soldier. To the others, he wasn’t nothing but a volunteer peasant.

They were close to reaching Belveyon, he could see the mountains from a distance. They stood tall, with a large village tucked in near their base. It was like a little slice of paradise. The whole place was surrounded with the Dentron that he had sent out to track the deviant. He must have been here for some time, because the Dentron were still lingering. They howled at the approach of the army, seeing as their master had returned, the wizard Aelnoq. He was being dragged ahead of everyone, with heavy chains around his arms and legs. How he continued to take each step forward was a shock.

“Everyone halt!” came a voice from ahead of the army. It was Mortek. “Make camp as soon as we enter the village. I don’t want any provisions to be wasted so I’m keeping people to watch them at all times. If a single person takes more than what they are given, they shall be hanged in front of the rest of camp. Is that understood?” Without even hesitating, the rest of

camp let out a resounding yes, Gylbard included. Sometimes, he liked playing the soldier. It was fun.

As they marched into the village, everyone was ready to attack the villagers, but no one was there. It was as if the whole place had been deserted. Gylbard noticed some children peeking their heads out of the windows before covering back inside. They were hiding. They were hiding from the monsters that had come to take over their village.

The army disbanded as they started making their way to an open field to pitch tents. The man that was leading the small battalion that Gylbard was a part of started barking off orders to his people. “You two, start pitching. I want you to collect firewood from the other side of the camp and you two over there, go and fill up the canteens!” The last one was for Gylbard and the soldier next him, who nodded, picking up three to four canteens and handing Gylbard the same amount before they headed off towards a small river around the bend.

Looking towards the center of their camp, he could see Morteck look into Gylbard carriage before chuckling and looking around. He knew of Gylbard’s ways and was expecting him to have switched out prior to now. The council got off their vessels and started looking around, making sense of where they were. They were staring off into the distance towards the beautiful mountains and the sunny day. “Keep moving forward newbie,” said the soldier near him. Although, the voice surprised him. “You’re a woman?” Gylbard asked. “Ya,” said the soldier from under her armor. “Not the first one in Peridonian forces, so I don’t know why you’re so surprised.” Gylbard shook his head. “No I mean I just wasn’t expecting that.”

She laughed, looking over at him. “I do get that a lot. What’s your name.” Gylbard looked down towards his armor, to see if there were any indication of what his name should be.

When he found none, Gylbard responded saying, “They call me Birsha.” That was the name of his teacher way back when, not that he remembered him much.

“Nice to meet you Birsha,” said the female soldier. “I’m Damia. I joined the army about a couple years ago, but I probably would have if I knew what we were going to be doing now.” They were walking through the center of town now, trying to get to the other side. Not a single person left their homes to bother them. They were smarter than the Folseleans at least. The streets were covered in rubble and broken pieces of rock scattered the streets. The Dentron had completely destroyed the place trying to get the deviant. If only Virago had done the same, she may be alive right now. He shook his head thinking about her.

“Look, I see a river just up ahead, grab that hand wagon over there, we’re going to need it,” said Damia, pointing over to a small wooden cart near them. Gylbard nodded, making his way over the hand wagon and Dublin all his things in it, Damia following suit. They started walking over to the river, the heat of the sun starting to bear down on them now. It was peeking fully around the blanket of clouds and a lot of the ice on the top of the mountains was melting down as well, flowing down the side of the mountains.

“By the way, what did you mean you would never have joined the army is you knew what was going to happen,” asked Gylbard, thinking back to the conversation they were having earlier. Damia laughed again, a soft but genuine laugh. “I mean isn’t is obvious. The chancellor is on some revenge plot and we’re all being strung along with him. I don’t trust him one bit. All this is completely unnecessary. I mean, did you see what they did to Folsele back there?”

Gylbard nodded, not trying to be abrasive. He held his tongue though. There was no way he would let a few words get to him. “I don’t know much about Peridon, I moved there recently,



but I've seen Viserwen. They are not in good shape, ever since the first continental war. Everyone blamed it on them. Blamed it on the king. The northern kingdoms, which had sided with Viserwen, turned against them. We had to pay for the damages and then what, we just got discarded to the side? The western continent wouldn't trade with us. In fact, they made the Viserwen coin worthless in their land. They decided to kill off a whole population like that, without any regards. That was wrong, and the chancellor is the one who is going to make them pay."

Damia stopped what she was doing to look at Gylbard sideways. "Well, you sure seem passionate enough about the issue. Ya well, Peridon, as you know since you've been there, hasn't been doing all too bad. I guess it makes sense why Viserwen wants to fight, but not like this. Not with death. And look at all the other northern nations right now. They're just fighting for more power and land. They don't have an ounce of respect for war and battle."

"That much we can agree on," said Gylbard, laughing. He started filling up the canteens with the running blue water, the reflection of the sun playfully landing on his face. The birds were still chirping in the trees near them, not derailed by the sound of the oncoming forces. For them, it was just another day being who they are.

"Excuse me?" Said a meek voice from behind them. Gylbard immediately unsheathed his sword and whipped it behind himself towards the neck of whoever had approached him. It was a boy, no older than five, looking up at the soldier with large, fearful eyes. The door to one of the houses was open and a woman shot out screaming for her child.

“Stay right there!” Shouted Gylbard, bringing up his blade, and burying it in the ground next to the boy, who was whimpering now. “Birsha what the hell are you doing!” Damia shouted from behind him, harshly. Gylbard brought up an arm and raised a finger, silencing her.

“What do you want boy?” Asked Gylbard in a rough voice, expressing his annoyance and hatred with the boy’s interruption without having to say too much. He was shaking, trying to grab a hold of himself, scared for his life as he had never been before. “I... I just... um,” the boy was stuttering not being able to let out a sound. “Sir please just let us go, we’ll go back inside. Those creatures could be on us any minute now!”

“I assure you, madam,” said Gylbard. “I couldn’t care less. We’re not here to liberate your village from the monsters. We’re northern forces, here for an invasion.” Her eyes widened as she realized her only child was in the grasp of a dangerous soldier. These people were not here from Endridge. They were not going to be saved.

Gylbard turned his attention back to the child who was staring at Gylbard through tears now “Now boy, if you value your life, you better tell me what you want.” The boy was still shocked and frozen in fear, his mother as well. Not moving an inch. Gylbard quickly brought his hand up, and was about to strike him, right before Damia pushed him aside, into the grassy plains.

“Birsha stop!” She said loudly. “What do you think you’re doing? You’re not like them. We can’t let these god-awful people get to us. We’re Not. Like. Them,” she repeated, stressing every word, kneeling down in front of the child now, hugging him. The boy flinched for a moment before hugging Damia back, feeling the hot metal under the beating sun.

“Are you okay?” She asked, to which the boy slowly nodded. “Is there something I can help you with?” He nodded again, gulping before he could get his words out. “I... I wanted some water from the river. We haven’t been able to get there in three days because the creatures have been making rounds.” Damia smiled under her helmet, as she reached out and offered him one of the canteens. “Here take this, and go back inside. It’s still not safe to leave yet.” She patted the boy on his back as he rushed over to his mother, who smiled at Damia before going back inside her home, and boarding herself inside quite securely this time.

Gylbard brushed himself off, standing up. Even though he should have been furious that Damia thought she could just push him, he didn’t. There had not been a single person in his life that had ever stood up to him like Damia just had. She had beliefs. Strong ones, maybe dangerous, but she seemed trustworthy enough.

“Birsha you can’t just do that!” Damia said now, going back over to the river to finish the job. “These are people too. No matter what these monsters tell you, this continent is not the enemy. They had nothing to do with the war. They are innocent citizens. And I can see it inside you that you are like me. You don’t find pleasure in any of this. So don’t pretend like you do.”

Gylbard nodded, smiling under his own helmet, making his way over to Damia. “I’m sorry, it happened in the heat of the moment.” He started picking up his own canteen and refilling them. “Could you lift your helmet?” Gylbard asked, without looking over at her. “What?!” She responded. “you know that’s forbidden until we are given permission.”

“There’s no one here anyway. Besides, I just want to see what you look like. I’ll lift my helmet as well.” She looked back, making sure they were alone, before nodding to Gylbard.

They both gripped the base of their helmets, unlatching the lock on the right hand side before sliding it up.

That's the first time he saw Damia's face. Her face looked peaceful and happy. She didn't look like a soldier by a long shot. Her skin complexion was darker and auburn hair fell across her face, messy from the helmet. She has deep hazel eyes, almost black, and her mouth was curved up slightly into a smile as she was looking at Gylbard's face. He gulped, realizing he had no mask on.

"Well look at you Birsha, you are quite handsome if I do say so myself." Gylbard smiled. "And your hair... It's a white like I've never seen before. Magical." Gylbard nodded. "I get it from my mother. In fact, I look more or less exactly like her." Damia was looking him over, it was almost as if she had seen him before but couldn't quite say where. "She must have been quite beautiful."

"She was," responded Gylbard, thinking back to his mother, and how she had died. If only... but he couldn't think about that now. Slowly, he and Damia both lowered their helmets so the only thing they could see were each other's eyes.

"Well we certainly learned a lot about each other didn't we?" Said Damia, picking up the handles of the wagon and moving along. "I'd have to agree," responded Gylbard, turning around and draping a mask around his face when Damia wasn't looking. "I really hope this battle ends soon. All this moving around is really starting to annoy me."

"Don't worry, it will be over sooner than you can imagine," responded Gylbard, walking in line with her back to camp. She looked at him funny, slowing down as Birsha started walking ahead toward camp, without a falter in his step. Damia had never seen this man before, but he

seemed so confident and sure of himself. But she shrugged. He seemed nice enough. And besides, how much worrying would she have to do for a simple peridonian soldier?

## **CHAPTER 15: Treva and the Cobali**

“It's pointless, idiot,” said Colin on the side of the road. The horses were grazing peacefully near them as Treva was squatting next to the wheel. Venny was standing near her, trying to get the vehicle functional again.

Treva was fuming, trying not to lose her temper as she fiddled around with a loose piece near the tire. It has stopped spinning a while back, making the carriage unfunctional. Now here they were, stranded in the middle of nowhere on the road to Enacreon. In the distance they could see the twinkling lights to the nearby village. Hopefully some villagers would wander near them and help them out, but for now, they were on their own, and Colin wasn't exactly making this a fruitful experience. He had gotten over his nice phase and gone back to his condescending self.

“If you think that wheel will ever spin again you're more of an airhead than Venny here,” he sneered. That's it!

“Colin, I swear if you don't shut up I'll knock your teeth out. And no, I don't care if you're the prince.” Treva had had enough of him.

“Ya, and besides, I don't see you trying to help us!” chimed in Venny, but she just looked cuter than intimidating. Colin shook his head and made his way over to the horses, trying to get on top of one to ride it, but they were really tall, and didn't have any saddles.

“Did you get that wood loose from near the axel? Holding this thing back is getting difficult,” said Venny, straining against the force of the carriage.

“Ya but it’s no use anyway,” said Treva, falling back, exhausted. “The whole thing is crooked. If we try to go any further, the whole wheel is going to snap under the carriage’s weight. I think we’re going to have to just leave it.”

“Hey!” shouted Colin, falling off of his horse after the 50th attempt, rushing over the other two girls now. “You know that’s not something we can do. This thing is packing more gold than your whole family is worth. And besides, there’s plenty of food in there.”

“Look, it’s not like I want to do this, but what choice do we have. If we don’t start moving, we won’t make it to all the kingdoms in time, so we have to decide soon.” Colin rolled his eyes and looked back at the carriage.

“Alright, let’s try heading into town and see if there’s anyone that will help us. I don’t think people will recognize me and Venny this far out so we’ll have to actually pay them, but I guess that shouldn’t be much of an issue.”

Treva sighed. God how she hated this rich prick. It was as if his only goal in life was rubbing it into her face that she was born poor and he was born, well probably the richest alive. But he was right. Their best chance was going to have to be this village. She walked over to a sign on the side of the road, pointing in the exact direction of where they wanted to go. It was a place called Quies. Underneath the sign, in parenthesis, it read, *sounds like Keys*. Well, that was helpful.

“Quies it is. Alright, we faced some setbacks, but we’ll be back on track in no time,” said Treva with a sigh. *Hopefully*. “Let’s go get the horses first, we can’t afford to lose them.” Colin and Treva made their way over to the horses, which had wandered off further than before. “Stay put Venny, we’ll be back in a sec,” said Treva to Venny who was resting on the wheel now.

The sun looked pretty off in the distance, behind a couple of clouds that looked so soft and gentle. It was bearing a strong yellow color, but had a faint red outline, which shone off of the trees. It was hard to imagine that a bloody battle was going to ensue on this land. It was enough to make Treva shiver.

“So why *are* you doing this?” said Colin as they made thier way over to horses, who had gone back to grazing now, their backs turned to the two.

“Huh? Oh, well I’m sure the same reason as you.” Colin raised his eyebrows. “I highly doubt that. Endridge castle is my home. Without it, I am nothing. Without my identity I’d be just like one of...” he trailed off as Treva gave him another dirty look. “But that’s my reason. I have everything to loose, you don’t seem to have anything to loose.”

“Well pal, sometimes that’s reason enough. You’re right. I have literally nothing to loose. Just last week, one of my sisters was horribly sick. She went to the medic and they wouldn’t even see her because she had no money. Luckily she isn’t dead, but that whole horror show taught me something. Without money, we are nothing. We’re not even human, just some trash floating through the unforgiving world. Just imagine, if I finish a job for the wizard and your father, I’d never have to worry about that again. Everything would change.”

Colin was silent as he took all this in. Treva knew exactly what he was thinking. It was these things he took for granted. And her vision was beautiful. Her and Mites would get a big house smack in the middle of Endridge and never have to steal anything ever again. Hopefully Felix would be there too. She sighed. But before they could get to any of that, they needed to get to town and fix their carriage.

“Well if that’s all that matters, you would have just ran off with the carriage. There’s plenty of money in there and I’m pretty sure I left you alone there a couple times as it is.”

Treva looked back at the sleepy Venny, who was looking around excitedly at the new surroundings. She probably didn’t get out much as it is. “You know what Colin, if it were just you and me, I might’ve done that a long time ago.”

Suddenly they heard a thunderous roar of hoofs coming down their way. Treva felt her spirits lift, there were people coming their way! They might just be saved after all. But her face dropped as soon as she turned around. Riding on about ten horses were a band of Cobali. They had a hideous look about their faces as they sniffed the air. Oh no. Their carriage was filled with gold.

“Venny get away from there!” said Treva as she started making her way back, Colin right behind her. The little girl screamed as she backed away from the disgusting creatures. Four of them jumped onto the vehicle and started fubling with the bags of the gold. They hadn’t seen this big of a score ever! This money would be all they would need for a long time. Eack Cobali started throwing the bags in an orderly fashion out of the vehicle. They were making fast progress, and before Treva and Colin made it to the carriage, they had jumped back on their horses and galloped up a nearby hill.

“Get back here!” shouted Colin, chasing after the creatures, but obviously to no avail, they were on horseback. Treva looked into the carriage to see what they had taken. It was everything. They had taken every last coin and every morsel of food, not leaving a speck of proof that they had been carrying anything with them.



Colin disappointedly came back to the carriage, his head in his hands. “That was it. That was everything. We’re toast. We have no food, no money, no nothing.” Treva was as shocked as she was, but she couldn’t help but agree. There was no way anyone would help them. It was useless to even try.

“What are we going to do now?” he asked, blinking back tears. He couldn’t believe the creatures would do this. Everything was going downhill so fast. Treva reached and felt her map, which was still holstered to her belt. At least that was good, not that she thought they needed it much, but whatever they had helped right now.

“Well I guess, there’s only one thing to do. Let’s head into town. Maybe we can steal some horses off some people before riding off towards Enacreon.” Colin nodded, understanding their predicament. They would have to start in town.

So they started walking, Colin and Treva side by side, with Venny skipping in a criss cross pattern behind them. The regular woods that were around them broke off more and more before they were completely obsolete. The town came into view and they could see it was a lot quieter and Endridge. The busy street markets and vendors were replaced with friendly waves and calm strangers negotiating prices. This wasn’t a marketplace, but for these people, it was mostly just a home.

“Wow, it’s so different here!” said Venny from behind them, running up to the small village now. She was saying what the others were thinking. They all had lived their whole lives inside Endridge. It was never so peaceful and calm except for in the dead of night. Right now, they all felt strangely at home. There was a large wooden sign that hung up above the town as they walked under it. It read, *Welcome to Quies. We hope you have a pleasant stay!*

They made their way into town, being greeted by people with friendly waves and smiles all around. They were being nice to these children who were practically in tatters. Treva had never really felt like people noticed her before, that she was just a thing back at Endridge, but here she felt as if she were a human.

As they made their way towards a darker alley, Treva shot in sideways, pulling Colin and Venny behind her. "Ow! What are you doing!" said Colin, barely keeping himself up as he almost fell to the ground.

Treva poked her head out the side to see if anyone had seen them, but everyone was just carrying along with their day to day life. She pointed across the street where there were a few horses hitched to a post. Their saddlebags were bulging with what was hopefully money. That would be the perfect steal for them .

"Do you see those horses over there?" said Treva, pointing across. "Well that might just be it. If there's money in there we'll be out of here in no time." Colin nodded while Venny looked around a little skeptical. "What's wrong?" Treva asked, clearly noticing this.

"It's just, do you really want to steal from these people? I mean they seem to nice! Maybe they'll help us get our stuff back from those creatures!" Treva and Colin both chuckled, looking in between each other. "Sure, you go try that and tell us how it goes," said Colin with another laugh, which made Venny furrowed her brows.

"That's not how the world works Venny," said Treva, patting her on the head. "No one is going to help without wanting something in return, and unfortunately, we have nothing to give. Just stay put. Colin, you come with me and keep lookout. Stay low and stay out of sight. When I give the signal, we'll move immediately."

Treva was glad she was finally getting to show her expertise. This was something she could do with her eyes closed. Treva thought back to the countless times her and her siblings had done horse theft and robbed saddlebags. These were ones with the largest score for sure. Treva gave another look to see if anyone was walking their way, and when the last person passed, she and Coline sprinted down the street with their heads low, and dived down behind the horses' post.

The first step was complete. "Alright, I need you to keep lookout. Singla me if there's any trouble. I'll get the horses unhitched and we'll be on our way in no time." Colin nodded, making his way over to the edge. He looked across the street and there was no one there.

Treva was trying to get the horses ready fast, but it was more difficult than she would have thought. The knot was tightly made. She was struggling to get it untied. Suddenly she felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Colin. "You might want to hurry, I see a couple of people making their way around here." He slowed back up, trying to get out of the field of vision, and Treva followed suit. They weren't getting caught today.

"Hi Treva!" said another voice, and Treva practically jumped out of her skin. Venny was standing right next to her. "Venny, I thought I told you to stay put in that alley. It doesn't matter now, just stay low. We can't afford getting caught now. Also, Colin, you're a pretty bad lookout. Venny just waltzed up to us here. "

"I have something important to tell -," Venny started. "Not now, give me a second, I'm almost done." The knot was almost coming undone. "But if you'd just liste-," Treva cut her off again. "Venny I swear sometimes you get on my nerves more than Colin. Just give me a second."

Colin turned around to tell his sister to shut up as well before he saw what she was talking about, and his eyes opened wide as he gulped nervously. “Ummm.... Treva, I think you might want to see this.” She angrily looked at Colin before noticing the scared look on his face. She turned around to match his gaze, and saw a man looking down on them, standing awkwardly behind Venny, his arms crossed.

Treva stood up slowly, pulling Venny behind her and slowly backing away. “Okay so I know how this must look.” She turned sharply to face Venny. “Care to explain?”

Venny confidently walked out from behind Treva and up to the man. “His name is Nadim. He said he’d help us find Cobali and get our stuff back.”

“Hey children,” said the man, gleaming at them. He had a scruffy beard and a funny looking fez on his head. The man was dressed for the heat and behind him was a horse. “Those pesky creatures give you trouble? They usually don’t make their way into town but usually steal from those passing by. I’d hate for you to remember Quies by those beasts. I’d love to help you out! Well as long as you leave alone my horses here.” He laughed haughtily, quickly untying the knots on the post and handing the reins to both Colin and Treva, who could nothing but stare at the man dumbfounded.

“Sir I’m afraid we won’t be able to compensate you for your troubles,” Treva chimed in, before they got dragged into some arrangement with the man. He simply shook his head and put up a hand. “Helping three lost kids is enough for me. I don’t need anything from you.” She nodded, smiling as she got on top of her horse, helping Venny on behind her. Colin got on top of his, quietly indicating to Treva that it wasn't too late to bail now.

She thought about it for a second. They had the horses. Who knew if they would be able to get what they wanted back from the Cobali. Venny seemed to see what they were thinking as she looked at Treva with pleading eyes. "He's so nice, we can't." She looked back at Colin, and sighed, shaking her head.

Treva didn't know what had gotten into her. This was the perfect escape. It wasn't like they needed anything in the carriage. Once they made it to Enacreon, they could simply restock. If what Colin said were true, the king there would be nice enough to them after knowing who they were. And she had done this a thousand times before to countless people. Why was it now that she couldn't convince herself to go through with it? Then she looked back at Venny. The girl. It was her. Treva couldn't help but feel like Venny was in some way important to her and she didn't want to disappoint her. Annoyed at her own emotions, Treva started behind Nadim, picking up pace through town as their horses made a loud clomp with every step.

"Where did you find this man?" Colin asked under his breath, leaning near Treva's horse. He seemed to be eyeing Nadim the same way Treva was. They both didn't trust him entirely. Why was he being so kind and helpful to them?

"Well, he actually came over to me and asked me if I was okay. I remembered what Colin told me earlier and I 'went for it'. Nadim said he'd be happy to help and here we are!" Venny sounded cheerful and proud that she'd found him. Colin and Treva couldn't say they were disappointed. Any bit of help for them would be very appreciated.

"So where are you kids from? We don't get a lot of visitors around here as it is, and especially not children by themselves. The only people that come through Quies are going to

Enacreon.” Colin and Treva both knew the dangers of what would happen if they told Nadim everything. They couldn’t afford a panic across the continent by letting everyone know.

But, before they had a chance to come up with some lie, Venny immediately chimed in. “You see sir, My and brother, Colin, are the royal children of Endridge. We’re traveling with Treva here, who was employed by the wizard Pruden to assemble the armies of the western continent together to fight off the invading northern contien-,” Treva glared at her as she was rambling on. Venny immediately quieted down and stared at the floor. Both Colin and Treva looked at Nadim now, waiting to see what he had to say.

He raised his eyebrows at the children, eyeing Colin, Venny, and Treva. They sure weren’t denying the claims. “Umm... I’m sure you don’t want me letting other people know right?” Treva quickly nodded, looking around to make sure no one else had heard what they just said.

Then Nadim broke off into a fit of laughter. “Well I’ll be. Of all the people in the world to help, it happens to be three children who are going to unite an army. I must say, it is an honor to be of your service. I just want to know one thing. Are we safe here?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” responded Treva truthfully. They had started making their way from the town over to a grassy plains leading to a small hill overlooking the town. “But the invading forces are coming in from the east. If they decide to invade Endridge, which is likely, you should be just fine. But, there are more monsters than ever before roaming around. You should be careful.”

“Oh monsters are common enough around here. We’ve got this little Cobali problem don’t we?” Nadim said with a wink.

Treva sighed, relieved. She was glad to have finally told someone else. It was reassuring, almost like telling a secret to a friend when you've been holding it for too long. They had gone up a little incline now behind a tall hill. They could no longer see Quies from this far. A low mist was hanging in the air and Treva could practically taste the mildew in her mouth. It must have rained here recently, and on the other side of the hill, there was very little sunlight so the water was still as plentiful as ever.

Nadim was riding all the way in the front, keeping his head on a swivel, he seemed to have done this before. He must have gone to retrieve something that was stolen from him.

"You know kids," said Nadim, interrupting Treva's thoughts. "I had a son once. He looked very much like you actually," he pointed at Colin. Treva gulped now. Nadim's friendly voice was now gone as they had turned the corner.

"I'm... I'm sorry, you had?" Asked Treva. There was definitely something off about him now. He looked as though he were longing for something. Treva slowed down her horse and rode in line with Colin, who seemed to be picking up the same thing.

"Well, he was taken from me a long time ago. You see, the monsters are creatures. The Cobali will actually do whatever it takes to get money." When they had neared the next hill, they saw a large opening at the bottom of it. It was a cave, and right outside, they could see the stout disfigured creatures throwing their money in the air. From where they were standing, it was hard to make out this large crate near them, before they realized it was a chest, a wooden chest.

It was hanging open and sacks of money were falling out of it. It was their money, the ones these creatures had stolen. Nadim was eyeing around nervously till he spotted a young

boy, around Treva's age. He looked battered up and tired and was lying on the ground near the entrance to the cave.

"I'm sorry, Nadim, but I just realize we never really went over a plan on what we were going to do," said Treva, low, as to not arouse suspicion from the creatures. Nadim, seeming to have ignored Treva's words said, "They took him when he was just a young boy. Every month, every month they ask for money in order to keep him alive. And its never enough. Oh boy its never enough for them!"

Venny hugged Treva tightly as Colin moved up slowly. "Hey Nadim you might want to keep it down. We don't want them to hear us do we?" Unfortunately, he was asking a genuine question. They could all see which direction Nadim was headed.

From behind them, more Cobali were moving down the hill and jumping around at the entrance. From their vantage point, they could see they were trapped. The only way out would be an all out sprint up the hill and back into Quies. But, that was probably more or less an impossibility without getting seen, and who knew how fast the Cobali could catch up to them.

Nadim was staring at what the others assumed was his son. Colin gave Treva a nervous look, one that she sent right back. "Nadim... why exactly did you help us here?"

At that moment, she heard rustling in the bushes behind her as all of a sudden, out of nowhere, the Cobali surrounded them. They were screaming and yelling at the children. Venny shrieked and Treva ducked her head into her horse's mane. Colin's horse went wild and bucked him right off, as it ran off into the distance, away from the commotion.



Their video's faces came into view and Treva could smell a horrible odor. Some reached out and started pulling on their hair and faces roughly. Nadim did nothing to help as he got off his own horse and put his hands up in the air. They did nothing to him.

Just as soon as it had started, the Cobali stopped and moved away from the children. They were caught. That's what was important for them to know. Treva, intelligently, got off her own horse before it went flying, quickly helping off Venny, who was sobbing and had buried her head in Treva's arms. She backed away on all fours towards Colin who was looking up and around him, confused.

What was going on? They were sitting back to back, staring into the eyes of manic, crazy monsters. These were different than the ones they had seen in Endridge. The creatures there were drowsily moving around, some fast, some slow, but they were in control by something. These creatures were manic. They were purely monsters, having nothing but pure savagery run through their veins. That also meant they were dangerous.

Treva felt her own hot tears behind her eyes as she looked around nervously. In all her life of stealing and running from the authorities, she had never felt the kind of terror she did now, staring into the eyes of death.

"Oh great cobali, I come with an offering. I am your humble servant and hope you will recognize my actions." Nadim was on all fours, hailing these monsters. They completely ignored him and moved toward the kids instead, poking their faces. One tried to pry Venny away from Treva, but she held on tight. This made the cobali angry and he was about to strike them as a voice erupted from in front of the group.

“MOVE AWAY!” Screamed the voice. It shook the very ground and the birds that were hanging on trees began to fly away. The cobali immediately quieted up and slowly formed a semi circle around the kids, but from a distance away. From the opening arrived the source of the voice. The largest cobali they had ever seen in their lives walked out into the opening.

Treva’s moth hung open as she stared at him. He had an angry look on his face, but she guessed that he must always look like that. The scowl was only matched in egregiousness by his figure, which towered over the others. He must have been at least the height of a human, which was not at all common for these creatures.

“What business do you have here Nadim?” Asked the large cobali, still eyeing the children. Now Colin and Venny’s mouths also hung open. The cobali had talked clearly !? It had actually spoken properly in english. Though the beasts had their own language, they did often speak English in broken and unformed ways. But this one seemed different.

“oh dear friend of mine, you know what I so bleakly plead for. My son’s life back. In return, I offer you three children, two of which are royal children to Endridge. I hope you will accept this offer.” He was desperate. They could hear it in his voice. It was breaking and cracking. Treva stared at him, disgusted. He was really willing to easily betray them and turn them to the monsters without even a moment of hesitation?

“Hmmm,” responded the king cobali. “So be it. Bring the boy out here!” Two of the other cobali rushed over to their caves and fetched nadim’s son, who looked so tired he was about to fall over. Treva’s heart sank as she heard this. They were about to be on their way. She thought back to when they were close to running away, but decided to follow Nadim. They were stupid and naive, almost as much as Venny.

“Oh thank you! You have mercy.” He began hugging and kissing his son who gave him a weak smile as he opened his eyes. The boy squinted slightly, adjusting his eyes to the sunlight. He must not have gotten much in that cave.

He meekly looked around him as his eyes fell on the children. His brows furrowed as he realized what his father had done. “What have you done,” he said in a low and deep voice to his father, who simply smiled back. “I’ve saved you my dear boy.” And before he had any time to react, nadim placed his son on the horse and fastened a belt around his horse.

“You’re a monster Nadim!” Treva shouted up towards him. He looked back apologetically. “For what it’s worth, I really am sorry to be doing this.” With these words, he turned around and rode off. Any hope that this was all just a big joke was gone, and they were left alone in the midst of the cobali.

The large cobali made his way over the children, as Colin backed away slightly, trying not to make any sudden movements. Treva breathed heavily as she looked around herself. This really was it. There was no escape. There was no way they were going to make it out of here.

“Is it true what Nadim said? Are you really the royal children?” The kids stared amongst each other. Looking back, Colin nodded slightly. The cobali nodded as well, looking at the ground. “That explains the money you brought with you. You were traveling to Enacreon. Why?”

Colin shut his mouth up. After what had happened last time they had revealed too much information, he was afraid to say anything he might later end up regretting.

The way Treva saw it, there was no way out. Maybe if they heard the truth, they would listen. Like a fountain, she started spewing out the information. To how they had found the hidden entrance to the castle and snuck in. She mentioned the wizard and Curmo and the northern forces.

The large cobali took in this information and processed it, nodding his head along as Treva told the story. "I believe you," he said at the end. The other cobali were silent now. They new something the kids didn't. There was something wrong here as well.

"We had some friends in the northern region, a cobali clan led by Xanbald. They never arrived, and it must be because of this northern wizard of yours." Treva nodded eagerly. It was enough that they were listening tho her, but even better that they were believing her.

"So you know we're telling the truth? Well must get to Enacreon. You have to let us go!" The other cobali started howling now.

"We don't have to do anything!" He shouted, indicating a finger for them to follow him, probably into the cave. The other cobali pushed the children up and ushered them along the trail. The ground at their feet was broken up and dirt was scattered all over the place. There was filthy smell around the whole cave, and it didn't help that it had recently raised as well. The children's feet kept falling into soggy pits of mud, getting their feet dirty and soggy. The creatures didn't seem to mind and they even began to throw around these clumps of dirt and mud.

As they approached the save, a few bats tried to fly out, but the cobali caught them just in time and began to devour the animals . Treva looked away sharply, covering Venny's

eyes as well. She had not spoken a single word throughout, and was constantly blinking back tears. She was just as scared as Treva was.

As they entered the cave, the children literally had to cover their noses to block the stench. It was horrible, like that of death and rot. Looking around, they saw the whole place was completely bare, except for the money they piled up all over the place. They weren't like ordinary cobali. There was something different about these creatures.

"I know what you're thinking," said the leader, as if hearing Treva's thoughts. "Why are these cobali living like this? I thought they had civilized and earned honest money?" He didn't say anything beyond this, slamming his fist onto a wooden table that was near him. "Well I sure as hell didn't ask for this life!" Treva flinched, closing her eyes.

"We were once like the other cobali, going around and collecting bounties or getting to work done in mines, but look at us now. I've assembled the largest band of useless misfits there are, and half of them barely understand what I'm saying." The other cobali proved his point by stupidly grinning at him as he spoke. "Anyway, I guess that's no business to you."

"So... what are you going to do to us?" said Treva in a shaky voice. The creature's sudden outburst had scared her.

"Hmm... tell me, what did Nadim tell you about what we were doing?" The cobali turned his head inquisitively towards Treva, completely ignoring the question.

"Well... he said you stole from the incoming merchants. And that you were holding his son trying to make money off of him." He guffawed out loud, holding his stomach and the others around them started laughing their heads off, jumping up and down and making the ground beneath them shake. Treva gulped slightly, looking around her.

“Well I’m sure he would. I guess he wasn’t entirely lying.” Treva furrowed her brows. What was it here she was missing? “We do steal from rich folk like you going to Enacreon. That godforsaken place is a hell hole for all those royals. People like you usually have plenty to spare.” Treva thought about this for a moment, she did think about this whenever she stole as well. Treva would only go after those that seem they wouldn’t be missing their money for a moment, never from the poor. In that sense, these guys didn’t seem entirely horrible.

“Well, then how do you explain the kid?” Venny said in a meek voice, barely making herself heard over the sound of the others.

“Ahhh, the boy. Well you seen, Nadim isn’t all he seems. This was all a big ploy to get you to come here. But you’re different aren’t you? You never came here to get the kid? You came for your money. You didn’t bother about the boy at all.”

Treva revisited the memory of meeting Nadim for the first time. He never had to tell them a sob story about the cobali because they were willing to get their money back at any cost.

The creatures began laughing again. “Maybe we’re more alike than you’d think... miss. Oh, I guess we’ve never been properly introduced to you all. Well my name is Worstof. I guess it used to be Charles but... anyway, what might your names be?”

“Ummm... well I am Treva and these are Venny and Colin.” She immediately felt stupid for using their real names, but it matter much now anyway.

“Well, miss Treva, I’d like to ask you, what was that you mentioned about a northern wizard?” Treva blinked several times, trying to remember how much she’d let on. At this point, it was everything.

“The wizard... well we don’t know him, but he’s controlling, um, creatures like yourself. They attacked Endridge just yesterday. And that’s why we need to get to Enacreon as fast as possible, or else we’ll all fall.”

Worstof looked on bleakly, taking a seat on the ground with a thunderous crash, which shook the very ground once more. He was a goliath in front of the small children. “We had a few friends up in the north, a clan led by a cobali named Xanbald. If what you say is true, then they are in danger as well.”

“So you understand? You have to let us go! There’s no other way.” Worstof looked at them, from the scared little girl, to the boy who was looking around in disgust, back to Treva, who had a kind of fire in her eye. One that he hadn’t seen in anyone in a long time. These three were different.

“You know my cobali populated this place before your precious Earth put all the wizards on it. The western continent is a haven for thieves like us isn’t it?” he said with a wink. Treva smiled a little, without wanting to. He seemed almost human in that moment. “If what you say is true, and I’m sure you have no reason to lie, then I’ll do you one better. My men will follow you to Enacreon. We shall join the fight.”

The others around them looked from one another, confused. They hadn’t signed up for any of this. Worstof looked up, raising an eyebrow and clearing his throat. The cobali immediately got the message and started chanting and cheering.

Treva’s whole body trembled as she looked around herself. They had just begun their journey and they had already started building the army. A tear glistened at the base of her eye as

she stood up, looking back at Worstof. "I do thank you for this," she said, nodding to the smiling beast.

Colin looked up at the girl in confusion as the sun made its back down, shining brightly into the cave. It shone on Treva, lighting her up for the rest of the room. There she stood, a girl in the middle of a clan of cobali. Pher hair slightly billowed in the wind as her tear fell to the cold floor below. Colin gulped, squinting his eyes against the sun, just barely making out the silhouette of her. This girl was something different. She was employing an army without even trying.

## **CHAPTER 16: Round Table**

The low rumbling of the monsters was fading now, as less and less made their way into the kingdom. Those that were still outside had quickly retreated after seeing their slaughter. The ground was littered with the bodies of the creatures and blood. The girl slammed into the trash can as she ran into the alley way, trying to run away from the creature. It had gained on her quite a bit, and now she was on the ground, sprawled on all floors on the cobblestone. She felt a burning sensation on her left knee as she looked down and saw that she had cut herself and part of her kirtle.

The strange beast clawed towards her slowly now, as the girl heard the sound of more coming her way. It was a strange looking thing. The beast had brown fur covering its body, which was deathly thin, It was no taller than a dog, but cluttered around with a long body. On its face was a permanent smile which stretched literally from ear to ear. Pointy teeth clattered in its mouth, making a horrendous clicking noise as it began to close in on its young victim. The



creature's body twitched from side to side, making its head tilt at random times, looking at the girl with sharp yellow eyes, two small slits of pupils in them. Its body was covered in gashes and a strange green liquid oozing out of them.

The girl trembled, picking up the lid of the trash can that had fallen by her feet, "Now you... you'd better stay back if you know what's good for you!" It seemed to be laughing at her as it reared back on all fours, about to pounce. In an instant, the creature's head was cut clean off its face as a man jumped in over her from behind, He landed a couple of feet away, crashing hard to the ground, barely having made the jump.

"Oh my god!" said the girl as she ran over the man to help him up. He was battered up and covered in scars, but she hugged him tightly, ignoring the blood stains that got onto her as well. "Thank you so much! I would have died. What might your name be, valiant knight?"

"I don't know much about valiant, but people around here call me Mites," he said with a laugh, checking around once more to see if the creature was really dead. It did not move.

Mites picked up his sword which had clattered away, covered in the green blood. He picked it up and wiped it off on his sleeve, feeling his heart racing. That was one of the most daring things he'd ever done in his life.

"You really shouldn't be out here, miss. It's not safe in the streets yet." Mites walked back to the girl, escorting her out of the alleyway, keeping his head low, looking from side to side as to make sure there was no one around them.

"Well, I have nowhere to go. You see I'm homeless." Mites smiled once more. "Well then I know exactly where to send you to." He walked her off towards his hideout. The barn doors were closed now and they made their way to the tunnel.

“Alright now you’ll want to go right in there and tell the other that Mites sent you, they’ll understand,” he said with a charismatic smile. She hugged him once more, “you’re a real saint,” before making her way into the tunnel. Mites brushed off his hands and made his way back into the streets. The job wasn’t done yet.

Just as he stepped onto the main road, two giant snakes made their way towards him with immense speed. They were about as tall as horses when they slithered with their heads pursed up like that. Both of them had yellow scales and a white underbelly, before Mites had time to attack, they were about to jump straight towards him. He got out of the way just in time, his foot getting bit in the process.

Looking back, he saw someone else running towards them at immense speed. Akuldra sliced through the wind as he twirled the swords around in his hands, kicking himself off the wall of a building near him, flying towards the creatures. All at once, Akuldra sliced straight through both snakes at the same time, the blades going straight through their bodies and poking out the other side. He carried through and practically cut the snakes in half before stepping back to look at the carnage. Mites looked admirably at his comrade. Oh how he wanted to fight like him.

A young lost boy in the streets walked out towards Akuldra, his face in complete horror. His whole body shook as he stared at Akuldra wide eyed. Seeing the boy Akuldra smiled, glad he was able to help him. Instead of thanking him, the boy ran off in the other direction, screaming. Instead of a soldier, what he saw was a bloody-eyed monster killing another. Akuldra walked up to Mites and helped him up, the annoyance on his face obvious.

“You know, back in Folsele, I was a hero. They called me the sacred guardian. All that these people see is a monster.”

“It’s alright, once you’re the commander of the army, they’ll respect you. I know I learned to,” Mites said with a smile, still looking astonishingly at the bodies that littered the ground behind Akuldra. He was a one man army. “You really know how to use your powers well don’t you?”

“Oh, well actually I can’t right now. I used up all of my magic back with that Egant.” Mites gulped, realizing what this meant. Akuldra had used just his strength and power alone to kill those snakes just now, and any other creatures he had fought after the Egant.

“Well all that mattered back then, according to the old crone, was getting those kids out of here so I really went all in.” They looked around each other now. This may have been the last one. The streets were completely silent except for the sound of the metal armour from the scrambling knights. Though they were horribly undertrained, the Endridge military had scraped together to help out as much as they could. Nodding, they started making their way back to the castle now. It had seemed so enchanting before, but now it loomed over the kingdom like a sign of death.

“Did you count the dead? Wherever I went, I only saw injured,” said Mites, rolling his shoulder backwards. Some of the creatures had put up one hell of a fight.

“No, the beasts did not kill a single person. They weren’t here to kill. Something tells me this was just to scare and retrieve information. With those that survived and retreated, the northern forces probably have a good idea with what they’re going to be dealing with. And that spells trouble. We’re going to have to work twice as hard if we want to prepare ourselves for battle in time.”

Mites nodded, realizing the situation. The northern forces were smart, They hadn't sent any soldiers in fear of losing men before the battle even began. But they succeeded in scaring the kingdom. Not a single person was in the streets, and those that were, were scrambling to get inside anyway they could.

"Hope those little runts made it out okay," said Akudra thinking back to Curmo. He hadn't gotten enough time to tell him all he had wanted to, but it was too late for that anyway.

"They're stronger than you think Akudra. With that Equex at the reins, there was no way Felix didn't ride out of here easily. And Colin was riding good enough as well. Besides, Treva's strong, she can handle herself out there." He was convincing himself more than Akudra.

Mites was worried for his sister. They had been together for so long, it just seemed irresponsible for him to have sent her out into the world like that on her own, but that's what Pruden had said. Besides, he did believe himself to some extent, Treva was strong, she could handle herself.

They arrived at the castle now. All the doors were closed in and not a single soul appeared to have been living there. They walked through the stone arches and made their way to the southern gate, knocking twice, very loudly. A scared voice came from inside, "Who's out there? If you're some creature you'd better stay back or i'm going to kill you!" Although, this didn't seem like the voice of a killer.

Akudra rolled his eyes. "Open the door Amica," said Mites. "It's me and Akudra." The butler quickly ushered them inside, opening the door just a crack, so the two had to barely squeeze by. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you." Amica began locking the door with around what seemed like fifty different locks, before finally barricading the door with a fallen table. Looking

around, they saw they were back in the main hall, a huge chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The servants and butlers were all gathered here, holding hands and sitting around the staircase, nodding towards the soldiers that had come back from the battle.

“The king has himself worried sick, he should be in the wizard’s tower, I’ll lead you to it.” Mites shook his head. “You wait right here, we know where to go. Stay safe.”

They walked through the halls, each footstep echoing off the walls as they made their way to the tower and up the staircase. Looking out of the window, they could see the carnage that had ensued. Egants lay dead on top of buildings with more of the smiley snakes beaded at the pathways. Dead dentron lay limp, leaning onto walls, some of them taking their last breaths.

Even though this had been a victory, it did not feel like one to Akuldra and Mites. To them, it felt as though something were very very wrong, and that something horrible was coming their way.

As they reached the top of the stairs, they noticed a small round table, which was probably not there before. There were six seats around it, two of them empty. On the others sat the royal couple, Bella, and Pruden.

King Locke had his hand on his forehead as he stared down at his crown, which he held tightly. Bella was sitting next to the queen, comforting her as she stared off hazily into the distance.

“Hope we’re not interrupting,” said Mites, making his way into the room. Without a moment of hesitation, the king jumped up and ran over to them, his eyes desperate and pleading. “Please tell me they made it out. Please tell me they’re okay!”

Akuldra grabbed him by the shoulders, staring him dead in the eyes, holding it there for a moment before the king looked away. “They’re fine. Your children made it out. Everything is going to be okay.” The king nodded, gulping, before he went back to his seat at the table.

They sat down now, next to Pruden, stroking his moustache, awfully quiet for the first time since they had met him. “Every little thing was coordinated. They knew about our weak points and where to cut into the city,” he said, thinking back to the attack.

Of course he had been a little late to create the shield, which was a lot weaker than it would have been in his prime. But even then, the monsters almost knew the kingdom better than he did. They knew exactly where to go through to attack us in our blind spots. Hell they even seemed to know the guards’ observing patterns, as to sneak so close to Endridge before they were spotted.

The king looked up from his crown. “Did we... did anyone die?” he asked, sounding meek and scared. Akuldra shook his head. “They were sent here to scare us. Nothing more. But I don’t think they’ll be this generous again. We should count ourselves lucky”

The king scowled at Akuldra now, turning his head to face him, his eyes in fury. “Generous? My own children couldn’t be protected so I had to send them away. My people are covered in their own homes, too scared to take a step outside. The entire of Endridge is in chaos and you think they were being generous! Damn it everything is going to hell, and you with it! You need to stop acting like you know everything and realize the situation, something your father could never do!”

Everyone in the room sucked in their breaths. This outburst had not been expected. Queen Rose pulled on her husband's arm, trying to quiet him down. But this had already been enough. Akuldra jumped out of his seat.

"You are alive! There are some that can't say that! Some that died trying to protect us and trying to save the damn continent! You want to talk about hell? Try going out there for once. You don't get the right to tell me that I'm not realizing what's happening! I watched Folsele burn to the ground while I ran away for my life! You're the fucking king aren't you? Then do your job and stop sitting here like a sob!"

Bella shivered slightly as she looked at Akuldra, his eyes were glowing like burning coals. Mites stared awkwardly at the ground, as did king Locke, who was eating his words now. Pruden looked unaffected by the outburst, still trying to figure out what to do.

"That's enough Akuldra," Pruden said, as Akuldra slowly backed down into his seat. He had spent his life trying to keep his emotions in check, and had succeeded at it too, all until now. Something was different. Upon hearing his father's name, he had snapped back to his primal instincts. The creature that binds itself to his soul has awakened, and temporarily taken over him. He would never let it happen again.

"What's important now is that we figure out what to do," said Bella, patting Queen Rose's hand reassuringly. "Well dear girl, for you, what's important is that you take on your new responsibilities," said Pruden. She shuddered thinking about the challenges she would probably face in the process. "I don't think I have very long as it is."

All eyes turned to Pruden. Everyone knew the wizard was dying, but the way he said it made it sound like this was going to happen sooner than they had planned. "Oh alright, everyone

calm down. We won't be left defenceless, not if I can teach Bella in time, and I am sure that I'll be able to." Akuldra nodded. With the kind of magic the great wizard possessed, there was no question in his ability to teach Bella.

"And for you," said Pruden, motioning to Mites and Akuldra. "I need to speak with you two privately for a moment." They looked between each other, confused, before stepping outside with the wizard. He sighed, his shoulders slouching.

"There is no easy way to say this, but I do believe there is someone amongst these walls that wishes ill for Endridge," said Pruden. "There was no way the monsters would have been able to get so near to us so easily if they didn't have any inside information."

Mites and Akuldra nodded, realizing what the wizard was saying, while also completely shocked with this revelation. They both knew time was of the essence, they couldn't waste time on being shocked or surprised.

"Now I asked one of the servants to keep watch of the messenger eagles, and unfortunately, one has gone missing periodically, and even right before the attack. Now I can't tell you much, but I do know that the access to these specific birds belongs solely to the military. Someone from the ranks has tried to sabotage us, and I'll need you, Mites, to find out who."

Mites furrowed his brows, opening his mouth to ask why, as Akuldra quickly responded, "Why just Mites? I can help as well. I have a keen eye for these things."

"Akuldra you need to train the ranks. Another attack is nigh and this time they'll come prepared. At least until Bella is ready to hold up a steady barrier, you need to focus on training. There is no one in all of Endridge stronger than you. And I do not say this because of the power you hold inside you, but because you have trained your body to near physical perfection. I know



that out there, you had used up your powers trying to protect the children. Half the time you were fighting, it was the human spirit in you, and it is strong, stronger than you may think. Besides, I knew Viri as well. No doubt he's not gone easy on you."

Akuldra nodded, knowing what the wizard was saying was true. He had trained relentlessly, his father had made sure of it. Even when his powers began to kick in, his father had made the training more difficult, something blindfolding him, other times tying his arms behind his back to fight the creatures in the middle of the sea. Though his childhood had been relentless training, he had grown more than any one soldier should have to sustain.

"Mites, I am going to have you sneak in with the other ranks," said Pruden. "As a result of the attack, while you two were gone, some civilians approached our doorsteps to ask for a place in the battalions. You will play as a volunteer and gain the trust of the soldiers from the inside." Mites nodded, understanding his post.

"Alright now follow me inside. Do not discuss a word of this with a single other person. There aren't many in this castle that I trust, but you two couldn't have done anything wrong because you weren't here."

As they went back inside, they were greeted with the king pacing the floor. As soon as Pruden entered, he ran over to him, "What am I to do wizard? You are giving positions to these people, but I cannot sit idly while I die out there. Please, let me help!"

"My lord, your position may be the most vital of all," said Pruden stroking his long moustache once more. "You and Queen Rose must address the people. The last thing we can afford right now is a panic. Tell them it is all going to be okay. I know that after the war your public appearances have been limited, but you need to show yourself once more to the people."

Locke knew this was true enough. The last thing he wanted was for infighting to ensue in the kingdom.

“Well, I guess we best meet this famous Endridgean military,” said Akuldra with a thunderous clap, smiling now at the rest of the table. “Yes... and I guess I should try and prepare a speech,” said the king, already thinking about what he was going to say. As they left, Pruden gave Mites a grim nod, reaffirming what he had to do.

Once they stopped the rat and figured out who it was, there would be no way for them to get overwhelmed again. Another attack like this wouldn't be as likely.

And now Pruden and Bella were the last people in the room. “How long?” asked Bella, fiddling around with her thumbs. “What’s that?” responded Pruden.

“How long do you have?” She was on the verge of tears now, not showing it to Pruden by keeping her head low.

“There’s no way to know for sure. But it doesn’t matter. I know you’re scared, but there’s no need to be. I will be able to train you, that is a guarantee.” he smiled at her reassuringly, but a pang of panic still erupted in her chest. This time, not for herself, but for Curmo. She hoped he was okay, wherever he was.

## **CHAPTER 17: Into the Lion’s Den**

The sky was getting darker as the equex still pounded on the ground at full speed, going towards the eastern coast. Felix was proud of the progress they had made. They had made it nearly to Belveyon in the matter of a couple days. The world whipped around them in an array of

colors. Hippo was moving faster than Felix had ever seen her. She seemed to understand the importance of their mission, and the importance of getting to the third wizard. He pulled out the map to take a second look at it, but with the wind blowing in his face, could barely keep it open for a moment with the risk of it flying away.

Curmo was sitting next to him, looking back from where they had come. He had a longing look in his eyes, one that sometimes found itself in a moment of anger and confusion, but came back down to a low shimmer. He was confused, maybe more than any of them. And Felix couldn't blame him. He had learned so much about his powers in just the past few days. It was crazy enough to make any man insane.

Sable was sitting in the back of the carriage, sighing heavily from time to time and pacing the small box whenever they were on level ground. She had been nothing but a nuisance in the past few days. Conversations with her consisted of complaining and arguing about random things that didn't even matter, but for the most part, she had recently chosen not to speak too, which was a blessing.

"Let's stop just ahead, I want to revisit the map. We're much further ahead anyway, we can afford a moment." Felix nodded, petting Hippo and slowly pulling back on the reins as the equine came to a slight stop just on the corner of the trail. Felix's stringy hair had blown back from the constant riding, and he shook his head now, straightening them out as he stepped off of the carriage, nearly falling twice.

"Finally, I don't get a moment to relax in that hellhole," said Sable, stepping out of the carriage itself and onto the small ledge. She seemed to have broken her momentary vow of

silence and was back to her old self. Sable coughed twice, giving both of the boys a sideways look, who looked confused amongst each other.

“For goodness sake, do you not have any manners at all? Oh that’s right, I’m dealing with peasants. Alright well, with royalty, you’re supposed to help down the lady first,” she said with a curtsy. Curmo, with his blood practically boiling, stepped away, not trying to start an argument here.

Felix awkwardly gave Sable a hand, who took it before carefully stepping down. “Well, at least you seem to be better mannered than that freak over there,” she said, making Felix smile a little. He took it as a compliment nonetheless.

The air around them was swirling and the clouds were darkening overhead. It seemed as though a storm were about to hit. Sable sat next to the carriage, stretching, as Felix made his way over to Curmo, who was looking inquisitively over the map.

“I don’t know how you can tolerate her,” he said without turning around.

Felix gave a meek laugh. “Someone has to stop this party from killing each other right?” he said, making Curmo smile slightly as he lowered the map. His eyes were bloodshot and he now had heavy bags under his eyes. Back in the castle, he hadn’t slept a wink, and he’d stayed awake the whole night while Sable and Felix had slept.

“Are you okay though? You seem... a little tired.” Felix wasn’t trying to be nice, but it was a lot more obvious than that.

Curmo shook his head saying, “I don’t know Felix. I mean, I’m just really scared is all. Back there, Bella is going to protect Endridge, and there’s no doubt another attack on the way, and we still have ages before we can make it to the third wizard.”

Felis nodded, understanding the sentiment. “But you have to understand that we’re doing the best we can. And Bella will be safe. Think about it, she had the wizard, Akulda, Mites, the king, and basically an entire army protecting her in what’s probably the most secure castle on the continent.”

Curmo sighed. “I guess you’re right.” All he could think about was what Bella had told him back in his dream, or whatever that was. She had liked him too. All those years, waiting and yearning to tell her, but he was too scared to ruin what they had. And the moment she knew, the world had to steal her away from him. It was downright infuriating. Curmo closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, though shaky.

“There’s something else you should know,” said Curmo. He was now thinking back to his encounter with that creature, the one that had tried to kill him.

“When I was with Pruden, we went inside my head or something, I’m not entirely sure. But there was something there. Some creature I didn’t even know existed. It was some kind of misshapen dark silhouette, like a shadow come to life. And it had these glowing eyes that felt as though they could kill you. And he tried to, but we got out in time. Even the wizard didn’t know what it was. But I can’t let myself lose control. Whenever i get angry, it seems as though something horrible happens, and I figure it has to do with that creature.”

Felix was practically squeaking, his knees slightly weak from that description. “Well... that sounds really bad. Um... but don’t worry, I’ll make sure you dont fuel into anything.” Curmo smiled, glad he had a friend with him on the journey.

Curmo pulled out the map again, taking a look at where they needed to go to get to Eslov in time. “Alright well we’ll have to go to Nero Crescent first I think, though I don’t know why we can’t just change course and head straight for Savage island.”

“I’m sure the wizard has his reasons. We would be wise to trust his judgement at this point,” said Felix.

“Alright well we should probably be able to find a boat leading up to there and we have plenty of money as it is. Getting a crew shouldn’t be that hard. The only thing we’ll need to watch out for is pirateering.”

“Hey you two, come over here for a moment!” shouted Sable from the other side of the carriage. Curmo rolled his eyes as Felix followed the sound.

“Sable for the millionth time all the food is in the back and it wouldn’t kill you to at least try and fetch it yourself for once. Poor Felix here is downright tired at this point.”

“Forget that! Look over there. There’s a party coming in our direction.” They all looked towards the path ahead and saw what Sable was talking about. A band of around three people on horses were making their way towards the carriage. As they approached, Curmo got a closer look at them. There were three soldiers wearing heavy armour and there was a black and yellow emblem engraved into their chest plates.

“Oh no,” said Curmo looking around. “Sable get in the carriage. Those are Viserwen Soldiers. It’s the same emblem that we’d seen on that one woman earlier. They can’t find out who you are no matter what.” Sable gulped quickly, jumping back into the carriage and diving down under a seat. Surprisingly, she didn’t ask for any assistance this time.

The soldiers approached holding out a lantern as their horses made their way towards the grassy plains where they had stopped their carriage. Hippo was happily grazing on the grass and the soldiers gave him a sideways look, never having seen a creature like it before.

“Who are you two?” A man asked, coming slightly ahead from the other two near him.

“We’re travelers sir. We’re going to the Eslovian market,” Felix chimed in. His heart was racing faster than it ever had. He was swaying side to side slightly as dizziness overtook him. It was hard to stand up straight. He was lying right into the faces of these soldiers and he scarcely believe it. Curmo himself couldn’t help but raise his eyebrows in surprise. This was the same boy who had practically fallen off his horse when Curmo had startled him.

“Alright then. Be careful around dark boy, and stay out of Belveyon, if you value your life.” The other two near him snickered. “By the way, we offer a toll for this road now.” Curmo gulped looking at Felix, who simply shrugged his shoulders and tossed over a heavy pouch that was in his pocket.

“Well this should cover it and more,” said the soldier with a smile as they laughed and moved on ahead. Felix’s knees buckled as he collapsed to the ground. Curmo rushed over to him as Sable got out of the carriage.

“Well Felix, that was a nice change in pace for you,” Curmo said with a laugh. Even Sable was surprised.

“Ya, you handled that better than I thought you would.” That was probably as close to a compliment anyone would ever get from her.

“But did you hear what he said?” said Felix, getting up slowly. “He said not to go into Belveyon. Do you know what this means?” Curmo and Sable looked at each other, confused.

If those are Viserwen soldiers, there is a good chance they're making camp in Belveyon. And if the whole army started moving, there might be some pretty important people there too!"

Curmo nodded. "You're right. It's worth a look. Besides, I have been missing home recently." He was slightly relieved.

Felix came very close to hitting Curmo on the head. "That's not what I meant! Why would we go into enemy territory?"

He ignored Felix as he stepped back into the carriage. Curmo had thought they were going to pass by his home without even visiting. He had missed his little cottage on top of the hill and the small path that led to the market. He missed his cow Bessie and Muralen and hanging out with Bella and her brothers.

"Belveyon? Ugh why do we have to go to such dingy places?" said Sable, rolling her eyes. But Curmo didn't care much this time. He was far too excited at the prospect of heading back home, before the realization struck him.

He recounted their near escape from the place. How the dentron had nearly gotten to them. If Zenvor hadn't flown. But he couldn't think about that now. His people were probably in trouble. The least he could do was go back and try to scope out the problem. Besides, they were much further ahead than planned. A small detour shouldn't make a difference.

"To Belveyon it is. You ready pal?" Felix said to Hippo, tossing him a couple carrots and bread rolls from the back of the cart. She jumped up to grab it and her skin immediately became more radiant. Hippo was ready to go.

"We should make it there before nightfall," said Felix.



“Well I’m going to sleep then. Wake me up if we’re getting eaten by a horde of monsters,” said Sable from the back, yawning, while making a comfortable headrest from a bag that was supposed to be used to hold some of the bread.

Curmo climbed onto the ledge and Hippo shot out straight for the mountains as soon as the guards behind them were out of sight, not that anyone could catch up to them at this pace.

Curmo could see the flickering lights of Belveyon, but it was a lot dimmer than what he had imagined. The creatures must still be lurking in the village.

“Have you lived in Belveyon your whole life?” Felix asked, shouting slightly due to the wind.

“Never left actually. Ever since my parents left eight years ago, it's just been me, and Belveyon was nice to me. The people took care of me. Although it does get a little cold at times.”

Felix could imagine, from the frosted tips of the mountains. The whole village was so high up. Merchants would often complain of the difficult road to reach the market.

They were silent now, both thinking about what they would find in Belveyon. There was no telling of what horrors Viserwen had brought to their continent.

“I... I’m a bit scared now Curmo,” said Felix, honestly still a little dizzy from the situation with the northern guards. “What if we get caught there? It’s as if we’re going into the lion’s den, on purpose.”

“If we can get any sort of information, it will have been worth it. We may never get a chance like this again. We know the terrain, we know the northern continent army is here, we can warn Endridge if we have to. It’s perfect.” Felix nodded. There was no saying if they’d ever have

the upper hand with the northern kingdoms like this. It may be their one chance to figure it all out.

Hippo came upon the incline now as they began to climb. She had slowed down, as the past was getting more perilous up the mountain side. Each crevice in the road lead to them all falling down. Honestly, Curmo gave a good thought about throwing Sable off now, it would make the rest of the trip a lot smoother. As they were going ahead, they came upon a small group of travelers. Looked about twenty people, also going up the incline.

Felix pulled on the reins as they got closer, slowing Hippo down a little.

“Who is that going ahead of us?” asked Sable, who was awake again, mostly from the rocky ride up the mountain path.

“Do you think they’re northern soldiers?” Curmo asked, peering ahead.

Felix shook his head. “Look at them, they’re farmers and merchants. Maybe they don’t know what they’re walking into.”

They stopped ahead now, turning towards the children as they made their way closer, and Curmo had to agree with Felix. These people didn’t look like soldiers. There were old and young in the group. All looked tired and weary. They stopped towards the back of the wandering party and Curmo stepped down, smiling towards the people.

“Hello there! My name is Curmo. Are you all going up to Belveyon?” A man walked towards them. He was young, but physically strong. His face was scruffed up and he seemed to have been through some sort of battle.

“Hello boy. We’re making our way to the market from Eslov. But you’d better turn back, there are northern soldiers up there. This is no place for children like yourself.”

“Wait, you know about the soldiers?” asked Felix, also stepping down. “Then why are you still going into Belveyon? What business could you have there?”

The man shrugged and stepped aside, letting another person make their way towards the back of the group. Curmo and Felix’s hearts almost seized up as they saw her.

Virago walked towards them with a smile on her face, and her brows furrowed in confusion with the children’s reaction. The realization hit her then of who they were. She recalled the incident with the deviant. These two had been there, but she didn’t know about that third girl. No... she’d never met that girl.

“You... but... We don’t want any trouble,” said Felix with a trembling voice as he stepped away.

“Calm down,” said Virago. She stood in front of Curmo now. They were staring face to face. The boy was frozen, but she was aware he wasn’t scared. No, he seemed... almost angry. There was something in his eyes that she couldn’t explain.

Virago then recounted the incident at the beach with more clarity. She remembered what this green haired freak had done, and more importantly, that he was magic.

“Listen, we need help. Our party is too big and we have nowhere else to go. There are too many mouths to feed here. Do you have a way into Belveyon? We were trying to figure out a way to get in unnoticed.” Virago looked quizzingly amongst the three of them.

“You... can’t seriously be asking us for help?” said Felix in amazement. “You tried to kill us!” Virago rolled her eyes.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she said. “I was after the deviant, and he ended up getting away. Anyway don’t worry, I’m not working with the northerners anymore. *He* tried to kill me after you all got away, thanks for that by the way.”

Curmo stepped forward now, his face scrunched up in anger. His eyes were growing a brighter green than before. “You could’ve killed her,” he said, straining every word. Bella was there with them. She barely escaped from that bird creature when this woman had attacked. She was inches away from getting trampled. His anger was radiating off of him and it even put Virago at a slight unease.

She gulped and took a defensive step back. “I don’t know what the hell you are, but I need you to calm down kid. Listen, I know that wasn’t the best first impression, but we have to work together now. We don’t have a choice.”

Felix grabbed Curmo’s arm as he turned around. He looked scared, but also nodded in agreement. Curmo’s eyes dimmed down as he saw his friend. He realized his burst of anger had come out again. Curmo closed his own eyes, taking a few deep breaths as he calmed down, turning back to the wandering travelers. They were on horseback, some walking on foot.

“Before I agree to anything, I need to ask you a question?” said Curmo. “You said you’re not working with them anymore. Why are you here then? There was an order to kill you right? This should be the last place you want to be.”

Virago nodded. “But we can’t worry about that now. These people are near starving. The closest place is right here in Belveyon. And there’s one more thing.” She stepped aside to allow a woman to come forward. She was one of the one’s on horseback. She was expecting a baby and Curmo could see her physical strain. It was going to happen any minute now.

He nodded. "Alright. I have a cabin. It's a bit secluded from the rest of the village so we shouldn't get noticed. There is a pathway cutting through town, but there's also a small patch of woods we can go through. It's dangerous, I expect there to be dentron on patrol, but not as many as if we sneak through town."

"Felix, I want to take the reins of Hippo and get everyone not on horseback into the carriage. Anyone that can fight comes along. We will lead the way through the woods. I want you," he pointed to the large man that had spoken to him, "to cover the rear. Send a signal up the camp if you notice any movement behind us."

Virago nodded, indicating for a few of the men to follow her. "There are about six of us who can fight. Let me introduce you to Auxy here too." They both nodded at each other. Auxy looked confident, but scared at the same time. Seeing him somehow put Curmo at a slight ease. He seemed trustworthy. He had a warm face.

"Also," she chimed in, smiling, "Thanks kid. That's some good work." She was impressed by the boy's ability to handle the situation. Virago could tell he was like her. He was a leader. The people would listen to him.

"This does not mean I trust you," he said, to which Virago shrugged. "But there are priorities we have to worry about."

It was the dead of night now. Not a sound in the air. Everything was quiet and still as they made their way up the path. In the faint distance, the sound of jubilation could be heard. There was the faint glimmer of a fireplace. The dentron were not as plentiful as Curmo had first seen them. No doubt a lot of them had been sent down to the attack on Endridge. This was still going to be difficult.

Curmo could hear the sound of their wailing in the distance as Hippo crept forward, keeping as quiet as possible.

Virago moseyed her way to the back of the wagon, passing Sable on the way.

“Hey there, I don’t think I’ve tried to kill you before have I?” she said with a smile.

Sable, gulping, responded, “No... um hi. I’m the princess of Endridge, Sable.” Virago’s smile slowly faded as she realized what this meant.

“I’m sorry Sable. I know the attack is on Endridge. Your people must be scared. But it’s okay, you’re safe with us.”

She smiled, nodding at the acknowledgement. She was in awe of the woman. Virago seemed so confident and strong. She thought back to her own life in the castle walls. It was almost shocking how different their two lives were.

Virago stepped out of the back door to the carriage and looked towards her people, indicating for them to follow her. The camp began a low trot as they followed the carriage. All the way in the back, Where Corvus and Fedor were crouching following the rest of camp.

“Curmo, which way are we going?” said Felix, looking at the Pertur. He was staring off into the distance. There was no noise of the busy market or the children running through the streets. The peaceful sound of the bard was no longer lingering to hit his ears. He couldn’t see anyone to wave to or anyone to smile at.

He looked longingly at the market, half expecting Bella to walk out, skipping on the cobblestone, with a radiant smile. But he knew she was back in Endridge. He felt alone without her. “Curmo, we need to move soon,” said Felix, quietly, but urgently. Curmo nodded, sighing, coming back to reality.

“Okay just follow the outer edge here until you see a patch of woods. It will lead straight to a hill. That’s where my cabin is.” Felix nodded, guiding Hippo up the path.

The sound of the beautiful night insects were gone as well, taken over by the sound of the cruel men, laughing and jeering in the middle of Belveyon. There were a couple of soldiers on patrol, but they were staying within the borders of the Villager. With the coat of night and their distance, it would have been impossible for them to see the camp. As long as they kept quiet, they would make it through.

Felix led the equex around the bend until he saw the woods. It was exactly like Curmo had described it. They would be able to cut straight through the village from the edge of the marketplace without being seen.

As the whole of the camp was ahead now, Curmo heard a sudden yip that made him suck up his breath. He had heard that sound a couple of times before already. Oh no. There was a dentron up ahead.

“Cu... Curmo... did you-” Curmo quickly placed a hand over Felix’s mouth, grabbing a sword placed to the side of the carriage and stepping down, making his way to the back.

Virago sighed as she saw his face. She knew what this meant. The camp stopped behind her. “How many?” she asked, jumping down, Auxy and the other five behind him. Curmo shrugged.

Curmo shook his head, They heard the yips from all directions now. The dentron were closing in on them. He sighed. “Get ready to fight,” he whispered. Although, he wasn’t sure how he was going to. He hadn’t had to swordfight a day in his life.

Virago, similarly, looked confused at Curmo's choice of weapon. "Umm... I don't think you'll be needing that. Can't you just do the magic thing you were doing before?" Curmo looked around confusingly. This was looking desperate. There were too many people here for them to just die.

He sighed, turning back to Virago. "I don't know how to. It just happens as an instinct. But I can't really control it. I'll probably go berserk if there are too many around us."

Virago smiled, "Well, we could use a bit of that right now."

Curmo gulped, nodding, as he made his way back up to the carriage, tossing the sword to Felix, who fumbled a bit before grasping it with quivering hands.

"Curmo you can't! Remember what happened last time!" Felix immediately knew Curmo was going to do it. His power was too unstable. There was no telling what could happen if he lost control again... like back at the castle.

"Ya I'd have to agree with him here," said Sable too. She knew very well how dangerous Curmo could get when he used his magic. There was no telling what was about to happen.

"From the sound of it, we're completely surrounded. There are three choices. We could either sit here and wait to get killed, make a run for it, and get killed, or fight, and not get killed."

They didn't say anything as Curmo went to the front of the carriage, out in the open. The trees rustled above him as the dentron came storming through the trees, none on horseback. They were on all fours, charging at full speed at the boy. The hairy monsters seemed savage. They weren't ordered to bring anyone back. They were here to kill.

Curmo slammed his hand on the ground, and felt that silky smooth feeling of the Earth's magic coursing through his veins. And that's when he saw it. He saw the creature he had been so



desperately trying to subdue. It was watching him, on all fours. The beast had burning red eyes, like the one he had seen on Akuldra. He gulped, fearing for what was about to happen. On his face was a smile, one so melevolous there was no telling what it was capable of.

And then it happened. The beast opened its mouth and said “let go,” in a deep, rumbling, and raspy voice. Curmo’s eyes got dizzy from fear. It was like seeing a dark shadow approach you from the doorway in the dead of night. The creature was terrifying. Curmo tried to fight it back one last time, but the *thing* must have realized his life was at stake. It forced Curmo back and he could feel a sudden burst of energy leaving him. It was as if before, he was only allowing a small stream of the magic through him. Now, it flooded through his very soul like the ruthless river that cut through Endridge. Curmo no longer had control. He could see, feel, and think, but the beast owned his body now. It *was* him.

Felix saw everything like in slow motion. Virago and the others ran to the back of their caravan, where the dentron had run in from, but his eyes were fixed on Curmo. He had walked up to the front and was now standing with one palm gripping the soil beneath him. He understood that the creature had taken over, just like Curmo had said. His friend was no longer there.

Felix felt a sharp shooting pain in his left arm, and looked down to find Sable practically digging her nails into him. She was seeing the same thing he was. The dentron was about to pounce on Curmo... and just like that, he chomped down on his neck. The beast roared before jabbing its teeth into Curmo’s side.

Curmo could feel the pain, but was numb to it now. Every feeling in his body to fight off the creature fell as he gave in. When he opened his eyes again, all he could feel was rage. A rage

so powerful it could've burned down a village. Curmo grabbed the creature's arm and slammed his other elbow into it, breaking the bone. The dentron yelped, jumping away. The pain from its attack was waning, as Curmo felt his neck. He could feel a warm liquid trickling down his neck. He was bleeding, really bad. But at that moment, he didn't care. All he wanted to do was kill each and every one of the dentron.

As another one of the creatures charged at him, Curmo sidestepped with his arms behind his back. Felix took a sharp breath as he saw Curmo's eyes. They were gleaming a dark black, gleaming with some sort of cynical energy. On his face was a creepy grin, one that Felix was sure he couldn't control. The dentron squealed in shock as it missed Curmo. It landed on the ground right in front of the carriage, turning its attention back to the boy. The other two that were about to jump onto him stopped right in their tracks.

Curmo looked around, waiting for any one of them to attack. It was as if he were enjoying this. Felix felt a surge of panic shoot through him before he saw the dentron to his left jump straight up in the air. Before it landed, Curmo ducked out of the way and grabbed the creature by its neck, slamming its face into the nearest tree. The entire tree fell. The force of the fall created a loud echo. The dentron lay on the ground, its head partially caved in and twitching.

The other two howled in fury, calling the three other dentron to the front of the caravan.

"What the hell are they doing!" yelled Virago as she and Auxe chased after them to the front. They all surrounded Curmo now, making circles. Each one of the dentron were large, longer than Curmo in length and they were baring teeth like knives.

"What is that," said Auxe, staring at Curmo. There was something wrong. Something terribly wrong.

“What happened to him?” said Virago, suddenly regretting ever telling Curmo to use his magic.

“I... I don’t know. I think he... I just don’t know,” said Felix confused and scared. Sable was gripping his arm tighter, practically stopping the blood flow.

“Everyone get back... now!” shouted Virago. Hippo seemed to immediately understand and started moving backwards, the others pushing on the carriage. Something horrible was going to happen here.

This time, Curmo didn’t even wait for one of the dentron, but charged at the closest one. He jumped in the air, grabbing the beast by its neck, and slamming him into the ground, forming a small crater in the ground below him. Curmo got up and pummeled the creature on its side, again and again and again. The other dentron looked towards each other, confused. They made out the three onthers that had fought the boy. One which now lay with a broken arm, another with its head caved in, and a third, which was lying dead on the ground, the boy still smashing his fists into its body.

Curmo turned around staring at the others, the creepy grin not having left his face. This time, the dentron attacked him as a pack. They howled, getting up on all fours and charged at him. Curmo elbowed the first one as one of the dentron grabbed a hold of his arm and sent him flying into a nearby tree.

Curm shook his head, feeling a little dizzy before he got back up, but before he even had the chance to do anything, they were on him again. His whole body was burning in the searing pain from each bite. He pounded his fist into the dentron closest to him and grabbed the throat of another to his left, pulling him off.

He tried and got up, but they all pushed his to the ground again. He managed to land another good blow on the dentron to his left which staggered back and fell limp, but the others were just too many.

They started clawing at him and threw him further back. Now, one of the creatures charged at him on all fours, and was about to clamp its mouth around Curmo's neck, before a blade pierced its skull, and the creature fell back.

Looking up, he saw the face of Virago, who was screaming something, the other behind her following and slashing into the beasts. Curmo, surprisingly, couldn't hear anything. There was this annoying ringing in his ears he couldn't seem to shake off, as he meekly got up looking around. The feeling of pure rage and hatred left his body and he put his arm around Virago, limping on his left leg as she got him to the carriage, Felix helping him up. He grabbed Curmo's arms and pulled him back into the carriage, closing the flap in the front, blocking him off from the bloodshed outside.

"Curmo... Curmo... CURMO... CURMO ARE YOU OKAY!" It was Felix, shouting at him. He was wrapping Curmo up in bandages. Curmo gulped realizing his surroundings again. He was in the carriage, nearly dead. The creature had let go of him. He could recall the fight that had ensued. He remembered how he felt. Numb, almost dead. After the feeling of anger had left, he felt like a husk, all the energy drained out of him.

"Felix, please shut up," he said, gripping his head.

"What the hell was that out there?" asked Sable, staying a little bit away from him.

Curmo shook his head. "I just don't know. I don't think... I'll ever know. It's some kind of dark creature. And when I got attacked, when I was dying, it just took over. It was as if there

was nothing else in the world for me. There was no happiness, nowhere to return to. Just the feeling of pure anger and frustration.”

Felix gulped thinking about this. “It must have been scary.”

Curmo shook his head again. “Like I said, I couldn’t feel anything besides the anger. And once that was gone, it was as if I was nothing.”

“Well they got you pretty bad buddy, don’t worry, I’ll fix you up though. Maybe.” Curmo looked at his body. There were gashes and cuts all over. Felix was almost tearing up from saying that. Curmo knew he was lying. He couldn’t see that clearly, but he could feel that he was worse off than Felix was making it sound.

The sound outside subsided as Virago jumped into the carriage, blood staining her armour. She crouched down next to Curmo with the widest grin on her face. “Well done kid!”

“Did I get one?” Curmo asked, trying to peer outside the carriage. Even though the door was ajar, the darkness of the night still held Belveyon.

“Get one? You killed seven dentron!” Virago said excitedly, ruffling up Curmo’s hair. “That was one hell of a show out there!”. He could feel a sense of pride erupt in him. He immediately felt how different she was from Akuldra. She wasn’t scared of what he was. Of his powers. Virago saw something to take advantage of when Akuldra would have seen something to subdue.

“But you did get scratched up pretty bad didn’t ya?” she said, examining the gashes in his arms and neck. Some were really deep. She stepped out of the carriage and walked towards the back of the caravan, entering again with a woman in tail.

“This is Amara. She’s the one that’s pregnant.” Amara smiled at the children, each one of them looking so brave. If they had ventured out here, they would have needed to be brave.

“I thought she was human until I rescued her brother. From the way he looked after a scolopendra attack, I thought he would never get up. But he’s walking healthy and killing dentron as we speak. She’s magic. A creature they call an Emanta. Kind of cool.”

“Hello! Curmo was it? That was quite a spectacle out there,” she said with a smile, which occasionally broke as she grasped her stomach, which seemed like it was about to pop at any moment. “I just want you to relax. Slow your breathing and close your eyes.”

Curmo nodded, following her instructions, moving closer to the edge of the carriage, Felix helping keep him sitting straight. She placed her hand on his head, and Curmo felt a slight tingle at first, like a little shock of lightning. And then a very familiar feeling overcame him. The feeling of the pure and untouched magic, but this was different than before. The magic he felt from the Earth was like silk sheets. The only way he could describe this was flowing water. Like a creek, and he could feel the cold tingle throughout his body and in his veins. The pain and aching subsided. Eventually, Amara took her hand away and Curmo opened his eyes, looking down to find his cuts and scars still visible, but nothing too bad remained. She had taken away the pain from his own body.

Curmo smiled saying, “Thank you. I feel much better now.” Amara attempted to walk back, but nearly fell over in pain, shouting out loud. She looked meekly at Auxy, who rushed over to her immediately. “It’s time.” Virago’s eyes widened as she stepped away. “Oh boy,” she responded. “We need to move fast. Auxy get on the horses and let’s get her inside the house.”

“Alright let’s keep moving forward. We’re almost through,” said Virago outside the carriage. They started moving forward towards Curmo’s house. Luckily for them, no one had heard the battle in the forest. They were all too far away and those on patrol were so drunk they could barely stand.

As they cleared the forest and made it out into the clearing, Curmo smiled. There it was. His little cottage on top of the hills. The mountains stood to their left, guarding him. To their right was the path down to the rest of the village and leading to the market. They were so far away, Curmo knew he would be safe there.

“Umm... does anyone else see that?” said Felix, pointing up ahead. Curmo gulped as he realized what Felix was talking about. There were candles and lanterns burning around the house. It was occupied.

Virago put up a hand, stopping the caravan where they stood. “This doesn’t look good,” she said, biting her lip. If the soldiers were staying in the house, there would be no saving them.

“Alright me and Curmo will go check it out. Everyone else, sit tight for a second.”

“Can I come?” said Felix excitedly, looking towards the two. Curmo looked back at him, so shocked he couldn’t speak.

“Um Felix I appreciate the excitement, but we need to keep the people to a minimum. Besides, we might get ambushed up there.” Felix looked down disappointed as Curmo hopped off the carriage as they walked up behind Virago.

There was a light chirping of the insects and the slow sound of the flowing river below. It was peaceful up here. “By the way, let me make it clear that I still don’t completely trust you,” said Curmo, being able to walk properly now.

Virago rolled her eyes. “Listen, the only reason I attacked you three was because I had to. Gylbard is going to stop at nothing to get what he wants.”

“I’ve heard that name a few times now. Who is Gylbard?”

“The chancellor of Viserwen. A vengeful soul. He’s out here in your continent because he’s taking revenge for his father. The king died many years ago in the previous war. Or so we thought. My and Gylbard had found out that he had surrendered. I was just a child then, we both were. But he vowed to get back at Endridge. Restore the honor that his father had snatched from him. He’s dangerous, Curmo. If you even get the slightest hint that he might be somewhere, I want you running in the opposite direction.”

Curmo nodded as they approached the cottage now. “Wow this is... small,” said Virago unimpressed, which made Curmo furrow his brows. They both looked through the window. There weren’t soldiers in there, but a band of about 10 people. Little kids and some elderly. They all looked worn out and tired.

“Ohhhh... This might get a little complicated,” Virago said nervously. Curmo looked at her confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well you’ll see. I guess there’s no easing into this. Let’s go introduce ourselves,” said Virago, confidently walking to the front door. They flung the door open, Virago walking in with a smile on her face.

The instant they saw her, some of the people cowered in the corner of the room. Others lifted a trembling finger, remembering her face.

“Well this is a nice welcome,” she said sarcastically.



“Everyone calm down, we’re not here to hurt you,” said Curmo, walking into the room in a blood soaked shirt.

“Then you don’t know who that is,” said an old man, the only one who was still standing. “She killed our people in front of our very eyes.” Curmo turned to her, raising her eyebrow. Virago sighed.

“Curmo let me formally introduce you to the Folseleans. The ones I *helped escape* mind you. Glybard wanted them dead, and I told him I’d lead them to the edge of the forest. I actually got these people on a boat and sent them off past the Folselean forest.”

“I’d rather be dead than live through the horrors that I’ve seen. You’re not welcome here you monster.” The old man’s voice was filled with disgust and rage. Curmo looked around at the people. There already seemed to be too many for his house. It would be impossible to get everyone in the house.

Virago was about to snap back at the man, but Curmo intervened just in time. “Look, I know the kind of person she is. My friend nearly died at her blade. I cannot even fathom the fear and anger you must hold in your hearts. But we have a woman with us who is about to give birth. Her and a band of Eslovians need refuge here. I cannot ask you to forget the mistakes she’s made, but I don’t think we have much of a choice. Please, I simply ask that you trust us. She won’t be hurting you. I’ll give you my guarantee.”

Curmo looked at each face. From the old to the children. Then he stared at the man who looked conflicted. “Please bring the woman inside. I have dealt with labor before. I’ll be sure to help her. You two can stand guard outside. Make sure none of those creatures come near us.”

Curmo gave a faint nod, exhaling a sigh of relief.

“Geez, this is your house. Doesn’t it annoy you that he’s bossing you around?” said Virago as they walked away, beckoning the others to approach as they stepped outside.

“It isn’t anymore,” he said, looking back. “No it’s ours now.” he looked around. From the Eslovian campers, to his friend and Sable, to the Folseleans.

As they all met together, Virago explained that there weren’t any soldiers in the house, and brought Amara inside. She was practically howling in pain, but the others tried to quiet her down as much as they could. They couldn’t risk the dentron hearing them. Everyone was ushered outside the house, with the old man, Auxy, and Virago staying inside with Amara.

Corvus walked up to Curmo now. “What do we do now? There’s no way we can fit everyone inside the house?”

Curmo looked back at the horses and tents. “We should set up camp. Do it behind the house here. If you follow that lower ridge a little ways down, we should be out of sight for whoever comes here. Not that anyone would. My house is quite isolated from the rest of the place.” Corvus nodded, getting the horses towards the back of Curmo’s house. “And be friendly with the Folseleans. From what I’ve heard, they’ve been through a lot.”

Curmo ushered Felix and Sable away from the commotion, making their way over the small stable. He could picture him and Bella there now, working on the farm, grooming the horses and cleaning the whole place. His eyes glistened with the shadow of tears. He missed her. Her warm smile and comforting voice.

“So this is where you actually live? Looks worse than the servants quarters back home. But, I guess it looks comfortable.” Sable scratched her arm looking around. Curmo smiled. This was the closest he’d gotten to a compliment from her.

“Come on up here,” said Curmo, beckoning to a ladder. “You can see the whole village from here.” They all climbed up, the bright full moon staring down on them. There were no trees, no hills, nothing blocking their view. They could see Belveyon, every inch of it. The steep mountainside entrance, the market stalls, and the path with houses littered on every side. It was so peaceful up here, even Sable smiled a little.

“I’m really glad we came this way,” said Felix. “I think this is good for us. For you too.” Curmo nodded. He knew what Felix meant. If they hadn’t changed their course for Belveyon, they never would have been able to help these people. And Curmo wouldn’t have gotten to see his home.

“You know, back before all this went to hell, I used to dream of a life in Endridge. There was just something there that called to me. I loved my village, don’t get me wrong. But I just couldn’t shake the feeling that I was meant to be somewhere else. Somewhere where there would be others like me. A life of adventure maybe. And for some reason, now that I have it, I can dream of nothing else but going back to how it was before, when things were simpler.”

“Well I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I’ll ever go back. Mother probably threw out all my stuff already,” said Felix. The others laughed. Looking back, Curmo could see everyone helping each other pitch tents and talking.

“I can’t believe we’re so close to the enemy. They’re right there. Down below, maybe plotting their next attack and we’re right under their noses,” said Felix, getting serious all of a sudden. A shiver went down his spine as he thought about what that meant. All those monsters that were sent to destroy Endridge were sent by a wizard. He was in Belveyon.

A low scream erupted from Curmo's house, barely audible to them. It was Amara. She was giving birth as they spoke. Sable seemed to understand this as she immediately chimed in, "Ugh, that sounds so gross. What's even happening in there?"

Curmo nodded, looking down at his feet and back up at the full moon that gleamed overhead. His eyes watered a little thinking about how far he'd come from just a couple of weeks ago. "What's happening is that a boy is being born. He is being born into a world of hurt and pain. One of war. One of death and destruction. One where anything can happen at any moment. One in which we need to win."

All of them fell back onto the pile of hay that lined up the roof, staring intently at the stars so far away. They all felt the heaviness of their travels, and were more scared than ever of getting discovered by the soldiers, but Curmo closed his eyes, and all he could see was Bella. Her warm face, her soft eyes, her hair which flowed like a cool creek on a summer eve. And with a smile on his face, he drifted off into the blissful embrace of sleep.

## **CHAPTER 18: Beautiful Child**

It was still dark when Curmo awoke. He had barely slept for an hour before he felt a sharp poke on the side of his ribs, which sent a world of pain shooting through his body, but he didn't get up. He didn't even open his eyes. His body felt hot and sweaty and his stomach rumbled a little from hunger. There was no pedantry where he lay, and so he didn't want to get up. To realize that he needed to face the world again

But when a second poke contacted his body, Curmo jolted up, suddenly realizing where he was, what he was doing and how he'd gotten there. His neck felt irrefutably stiff. Curmo

groaned as he looked around him, his eyes adjusting to the dark. Next to him on the right lay Felix. He was sprawled out across the roof with his mouth hanging wide open, snoring. Surprisingly, Sable was laying next to him, her body pulled up against his side, with her eyebrows scrunched up in discomfort. She must have been having some bad dreams.

Curmo looked back around to his left, to see who had poked him, and found Virago staring towards him, with an eager smile on her face.

“Why’d you wake me up? I was having the best dream...” he complained. And it was no lie. He was dreaming of feeding Zenvor back in the large bard behind Muralen’s house.

“Amara told me to get you. She’s had a boy. Apparently it’s in Eslovian culture for the mother to hand her child to the resident of where she gave birth. Since it wasn’t a doctor, she’s going to hand the child to you.”

Curmo gulped and gave a faint smile, feeling more or less ecstatic on the inside. He felt so important knowing he had helped Amara as much as he had. Stepping down from the rungs of the ladder, Curmo exclaimed, “I wouldn’t have expected a killer to realize the values of tradition.”

Virago shot him a dirty look. “Don’t call me that alright? Besides, like I said, that’s behind me. I don’t want to drink your blood!” she said with added sarcasm, giving a hollow laugh. “No, the next person I kill is going to have to be Gylbard. Speaking of which, I have something important to tell you. But I guess it can wait a moment.”

They approached the entrance to the cottage. For some reason, Curmo’s heart was racing. He couldn’t figure out why. After all he had been through, it seemed as though he were feeling

nervous to meet the child. And so he stood there, staring at the door, as he heard a faint crying on the other side, followed by some beautiful singing and a man chuckling.

“Mmmhmm,” Virago cleared her throat, patting Curmo on the back. Heaving a sigh, he gently pushed open the door to the cottage. The little room was crowded with people. The Eslovians had gotten together to welcome the newest member of their family. Amara and Auxy were holding each other's hands and smiling at their child, so engrossed that they barely even noticed Curmo and Virago as they entered the room. There was a low musty smell that lay in the air and Curmo could see the old Folselean standing in the corner of the room, staring willfully at the happy family.

But looking at Auxy and Amara immediately struck a chord in Curmo's heart. One which he could immediately place. He was feeling the loss of his parents all of a sudden. Like a wave of emotions, even while he was surrounded by all these people, he felt alone in some way. They were staring over their boy, playing with his little hands. Curmo hadn't felt the warm touch of his mother ever since he was eight.

But, even with this pang in his heart, Curmo smiled and stepped forward, clearing his throat to announce his entrance into the room. Immediately, Auxy jumped forward and embraced Curmo. His eyes were tearing up slightly as well.

Curmo, almost taken aback, just stood there. “Thank you son. You helped us more than you could ever know. I don't know what would have happened if we were still out there. Maybe our child... No, but it doesn't matter. You're our savior.” There was just so much gratitude in his voice, it hurt Curmo just hearing it. He felt so appreciated and loved in that moment, that the

pang that he had felt in his heart slowly dissipated. Looking around the room, the other Eslovians seemed grateful as well, nodding their heads slightly as they met Curmo's eyes.

Then Auxy stepped out of the way, putting one hand out in front of him, guiding him towards Amara and the child. Amara looked up at him, saying what Auxy just had with her eyes.

"The boy. We hadn't really thought of a name for him before. Auxy and I had sometimes thought to name a boy after my grandfather, his name was Orlius. What do you think?"

Curmo smiled and nodded. "That sounds like a beautiful name." Amara nodded, reaching out her arms to give Curmo the child, who was no longer fussing. He could barely keep his eyes open for a moment, but he was now staring at Curmo.

Gulping, he took the child from Amara's hand, and felt the weight of the boy against his own chest. The weight of a precious creature, not yet corrupted by this world yet. All the nervousness that he had felt before entering the room vanished and Curmo was left with a need to protect this child.

His head was wide and plump, void of any hair. On his face were two gorgeous blue eyes, shining like the ocean. The baby was wrapped in linens, some cloth that must have been torn off of a tent or from the caravan. He was breathing calmly now, content in Curmo's arms.

Then something strange happened. The baby looked at Curmo, right in his eyes. His squealing stopped and all noise in the room stopped. He put an arm forward, his right one, with his little pudgy fingers outstretched. Through his fingers, there was a slow light blue glow at first, and then it picked up in intensity.

Curmo could see it outlining the child's veins. It was like a neon liquid flowing through his whole body. The realization came to him that he wasn't holding any ordinary child. This was

a child born of magic, similar to Amara's. Curmo's eyes widened as he gulped, the child placing his hand calmly on the center of Curmo's chest. And he felt a serenity like he never had before. It felt as if a calm ocean were taking over his whole body and he felt a burst of warmth across his arms and legs.

As Curmo opened his eyes, the others were looking towards the baby with the same shock as Curmo felt. Had they just seen him change *colors*? What had just happened? Everyone except Amara. She was smiling, water in her eyes. Curmo walked over to her, the room still in silence, handing her the child.

"Umm... what the hell is that thing?" said Virago, breaking the stillness.

"As you've seen before, I am a healer. My body can physically mend those that are ill. Bless my family for that because we've felt a lot of pain, but there was another kind of healing. Something different that didn't get passed down each generation. A gift that my child has inherited but I have not. He is still an Emanta, but he has the power to heal the soul. The very essence of your mind that troubles you. My child is something beautiful and special."

Her voice was nearly breaking as she clutched Orlius close to her chest. As her brother and Auxe crowded around Amara to see the miracle child, Virago placed a hand on Curmo's shoulder, guiding him outside. The ceremony was over.

His eyes were still wide in shock and the feeling of serenity had not left him. It was as if the pure essence of negativity and hate and fear was sucked out of him. He was, in a way, reborn.

"Well that was something," Virago remarked, breathing the frosty air of the night. "I hope you're feeling better because I've got some serious news to tell you." Curmo rolled his eyes, hoping he would get to rest for just a moment. But it didn't seem that way now.



Walking over towards them was Sable and Felix, who must have noticed that Curmo was missing when they awoke.

“That was some of the best sleep I’ve ever gotten in my life,” groaned Sable, yawning loudly. “Which makes no sense because I usually sleep on a bed filled with goose feathers.”

“Curmo! Where were you? I panicked when I saw you were missing,” said Felix excitedly. He was as scared as he was before, but maybe a little less nervous.

“I’m fine guys. Apparently Virago here has some plan or something. What were you going to say?” They all turned to face her.

“Well... I guess it's better if you see it first. Follow me.” She led them around the back of Curmo’s house. The camps seemed to have been all set up and almost everyone was sleeping. Some of the Eslovians and the older Folseleans hung out towards the edge of camp, keeping watch. Virago led them to a tent to the far end of the camp, a little bit further from the others.

Upon arriving, she said, “Alright you can come out now.” From inside the tent emerged a soldier. A northern soldier.

Curmo’s heart froze for a moment at the sight of the armored soldier standing in front of him. The knight reached a hand out towards Sable who was the closest to it. In the blink of an eye, Sable yelped and snatched the sword at Virago’s hip and slammed the blunt hilt into the person’s helmet.

The others were so taken aback by the quick succession of events that they didn’t even know how to react. Virago just stood there staring at Sable wide eyed, who’d retreated back.

Then shaking her head, Virago snapped back to reality and rushed over to the soldier taking off the helmet. The knight was a beautiful woman, with a dark skin complexion and auburn hair that fell down her face.

“What the hell was that!” said Virago with more surprise than annoyance. “You can fight? Didn’t you say you were the princess?”

“Well, my father had me and my brother train ever since we turned ten. I guess he always suspected we’d leave one day. But who the hell is that?! Are you turning us in?”

Virago tried to shake her head and speak, but before she could, Curmo jumped in. “How could you? Think about Amara... and Auxy... and the other Folseleans! Haven’t you hurt them enough? Think about the refuge-”.

“Oh shut up will you,” Virago cut in. “I’m not turning anybody in. This is my friend. Her name is Damia. She was under my battalion for a... well for a war but I don’t want to get into that right now.”

“Wait... then why was she trying to grab me?” said Sable, stepping forward now.

“I wasn’t,” Damia cut in, standing back up now. She had a wide grin on her face. She was apparently also impressed by Sable’s quick swordsmanship. Her voice was coarse but flowed like an instrument. “I was trying to shake your hand.”

Sable nodded, sheepishly. “Oh. Sorry about that.” Damia started laughing lightly, looking around at the camp. She seemed tired, almost too much so. A layer of sweat had formed over her brow under the helmet, but it was cooler now.

“Damia was the trouble maker back in the day,” explained Virago, turning to the others. “She never agreed with violence, but she was gifted with a sword, and that meant she had to

fight. Why I still trust her I don't know, but Damia owes me her life, and I think I know how she can repay it."

Damia nodded, agreeing with Virago. "I was forced to join the military at a young age, and when I lived in Viserwen, I trained under general Virago. But I never knew we were coming here. I never knew what we were doing. This is all... so horrible. General, my debt to you still stands, as fighting against Gylbard would not only be a privilege, but an honor."

There was a scary look in her eye. Damia had seen something horrible. Curmo thought back to the Folselean camp still back at his home. No doubt she was still thinking about the first invasion. About the slaughter. It gave Curmo chills down his spine just thinking about it.

"Wait, you said you had an idea on how Damia could repay the debt. I reckon it has something to do with the enemy camp?" chimed in Felix. He was fiddling his thumbs. Whatever Virago was about to say next, he would probably not want to be a part of.

Virago smiled. "Gylbard is down there. He is the one leading the charge. If we go down there, we can finish this. We can end the war right here. With Gylbard dead, there would be no one to lead the armies."

Felix's eyes opened wide as he cleared his throat and stepped forward, warranting an eyebrow raise from Virago. "Umm... okay so you mean kill him?" Virago looked around, trying to read everyone's face.

"Oh... was that not obvious. Yes. We'll go down there and we'll kill him. It's going to be difficult but we can end the whole war right now."

"Oh great that's what I thought I heard because - are you crazy!" Felix snapped, raising his voice but trying not to shout as to attract attention. The noise from down the village was gone

now. They had all probably gone to sleep. “I don’t think you know who we are, but we are not going to kill someone! Are we?”

Damia shrugged. She was unfazed. From what she’d seen, it was hopeless. There was really only one thing to do. And she would do whatever it took to achieve it.

“Sorry, just have to step in here for a moment, but I don’t think full blown murder is a good idea. Seems impractical,” said Sable, stepping into the conversation. Virago was getting obviously irritated now.

“Look, it’s not like we’re looking for your validation anyways. There’s only one person here that we really need to complete the mission.” Suddenly, all eyes were on Curmo. Even Damia’s. Virago had told her everything about what had happened. He looked up, still feeling a string aching in his stomach from when he’d gotten attacked by the Dentron.

“Curmo... what do you think?” said Felix, twiddling his thumbs. Curmo turned around. He looked at the refugees, hiding in his small cabin. It didn’t need to be like this. A little while under him was Bella’s family. If they didn’t act soon, it might not be long before Belveyon faced the same turmoil as Folsele. With a heavy sigh, he turned around to Virago.

“I think it’s a good idea to scout. Let’s just look around and see what we learn. And then if Virago calls it, I’ll kill the bastard myself.”

Virago smiled, turning back to Felix and Sable, and looked at each other with a gulp.

“Well, I guess if beast boy here is going, I’ll have to tag along. Besides, I owe this Gylbard character big time for harming my people,” said Sable confidently.

Felix sighed, his arms by his side in defeat. Of course he would go with Curmo. Curmo had saved him from the farm. It was now his turn to return the favor and the least he could do was stand by his side.

“Ya alright I’ll come,” he said, sneaking a smile, to which Curmo patted him on the back, proud of his friend. He really had come a long way.

“Then it’s settled,” said Damia. “Let’s finish this.” Suddenly, Curmo fell flat on his face, his mind dissolving into blackness.

## **CHAPTER 19: A New Old Face**

The floor was slippery under Bella’s feet as she nimbly hopped from step to step down the stone staircase. The roaring sound of the waterfall was just to her right. It was so far away from her, yet it splashed her face with a cool mist. She wiped it off her face as she finally caught up with the old wizard below. He was practically gliding, despite his old age.

Pruden had very quickly become Bella’s greatest companion in the two days that she’d been there. After the invasion, she was so shaken up she didn’t think she’d ever recover. He’d calmed her down. The potions obviously helped. She had slept so soundly, she never woke before around noon the next day.

But this morning was different. As she was thinking back to when Pruden had woken her up early, his voice shocked her. They were still a long ways up.

“Enjoying the view? Be careful on the steps. They are slippery. After that there’ll be no potions to help you,” he lightly chuckled to himself with this witty joke, but stopped for a moment, to allow Bella to catch up. Her clothes were practically drenched now. The mist from

the waterfall had increased in intensity as they traveled further down. It was beginning to feel more and more like being stuck in a horrible rainstorm, but Bella didn't seem to notice much.

Her mind was elsewhere. She bit her lower lip, as her mind wandered far away from the waterfall, far away from Endridge and the valleys that surrounded it. Pruden could tell the moment he saw her. Her eyes were darting from place to place and she seemed fidgety.

"What?" asked Bella as she saw Pruden staring at her. "Is there something on my face?"

"Bella... I know what you're thinking about. You worry about Curmo. I remember what I saw back there. Thinking back to it, I guess it was pretty obvious too," he let out another chuckle.

Bella looked at him annoyed, "I never really knew it. Till two days ago I could never have guessed for a second. Now I'm thinking back to all the early mornings I'd spend over at his house. The summer festivals and occasional visits to meet his dragon." She smiled, tearing up slightly, thinking back to the days when everything was normal.

Bella felt her heart ache as she thought of the moment before he left. "And when he finally said it... the world took him away from me." There was a longing in her voice. It signified a void that needed to be filled.

"I know you worry about kiddo," said Pruden, putting a hand on Bella's shoulder. "But he's going to be just fine. And you need to focus on learning magic!" With that, there was a sudden pep in his voice that immediately pulled Bella back to reality.

"That reminds me," Bella chimed in. "Why haven't I actually done any magic yet? I barely even know how it works." Pruden ushered her forward with his finger while he started back down the stairs.

“There is something I need to show you first. Magic is an art that requires concentration. To the fullest extent. Those that are born with it simply need to channel the power, but you, you will need to create it inside of you.”

Bella looked at him quizzically. What was he talking about?

“There is someone I’d like you to meet first. I think you’ll like him.” Pruden chimed in, before Bella could say anything.

And after a few minutes of walking, they were finally down the waterfall. Bella was drenched head to toe while Pruden’s clothes were barely damp. She wrung out her hair, even more annoyed at the old wizard. They were at the foot of the waterfall, facing the giant lake that could have been seen from miles away. Bella stood at the bottom, with her hands on her legs, breathless from the descent.

But the lake itself was enough to re-energize her. It was a beautiful and crisp blue and seemed to stretch for more miles, but there was another fall at the end of it, leading to another lake below.

The color of the lake was a rich and dark one. It meant the water was deep, really deep. As she approached the water, Bella could tell this was no ordinary lake. There was no shoreline that led slowly into the water. This was a drop. Sudden. Immediate. It was made by man... or probably magic.

But as she got too close to the water, entranced by its peculiarity, she was stopped by Pruden, who blocked her path.

“You shouldn’t go much closer,” he advised. “As you’ve probably noticed, this isn’t the place you would go fishing... well unless you weren’t looking for fish.” He had another one of

his fits of laughter. But he was barely audible over the still massive roar of the waterfall, which sprayed water even more than on the staircase.

“Why are we here again?” Asked Bella.

“That’s because,” responded Pruden, “I think I suspect foul play from one of my friends.” He closed his eyes and spread his arms towards the wind. There were both in front of a majesty of nature, just a mere spectacle in front of a giant landscape.

Bella looked around before raising her eyebrows at Pruden. “Here? Your friend is here?” The only things near them were jutting rocks towards the end of the lake keeping the water in. Besides that, it was the bottomless pit in front of her.

“You’ll see!” He said with a grin. It was mischievous. He stepped up to the water, pushing his long, ridiculous cloak behind him. With a deep breath, Pruden reached two hands out in front of him, towards the lake.

Bella could feel a slight tingle on her skin. It was as if the air itself were electric. Was this the feeling of true magic?

The water in the pit started to churn now, rocking back and forth, as if being moved by an invisible arm. Water leapt out from the pool in a miraculous fountain as Bella saw a large silhouette right beneath the watery surface. Something large was down there.

She heard the low rubbing of a roar as the shadow got larger and closer. Suddenly, all the water burst out at once. Pruden stood in front of it with his arms out and a smile plastered on his face. The sun was spotlighting the beast that leaned back its head and let out a miraculous roar, bellowing over the mountaintops and across the valleys.



Bella, once again drenched with water, starred with her mouth gaping wide open. This was a creature more fearsome than her dragon friend, Zenvor. It was a beast resembling a snake. It has slimy skin with green scales.

The creature's head housed three rows of teeth the size of young children. They were caked with green moss. It's mouth looked like the inside of a cave. As Bella was staring up at it, it's immense size became apparent. The creature was many times her height, and more so seemed to be three times the size of a house.

It bore scratches and marks across its body and on its head. Bella was frozen in fear. It whipped its head down with two glowing red eyes.

"There you are my old friend!" Cried Pruden, lifting his right hand towards the creature. It threw its head back and let out a deafening roar that rolled across the mountaintops, shaking the snow off of peaks. Bella lugged her ears and plucked to the ground. Pruden didn't seem to notice.

Suddenly the creature snapped its neck to stare directly at Bella. There was anger in its eyes. Rearing back, it charged straight for her at immense speed. Bella opened her mouth to scream but couldn't even do that. This is how it was going to end. She would never even see Curmo again.

Pruden jumped in between them, a frail old man in comparison to this creature. As they made contact, Pruden threw the beast's head to the side with a kind of immense power Bella didn't know he possessed. The beast flailed as it hit the rockside of the lake and shook its head, trying to get a better look at the man who was able to stop it.

“Calm down now. She’s a friend. And by the way, don’t you remember your old pal?” As the snake looked bad down on the man, the red anger from his eyes was gone. Instead, it was replaced with an elated joy as it brought its head back down for Pruden to pat it, practically knocking him over.

Laughing, pruden said, “Alright boy! There you are! It sure has been a while. How’ve you been doing huh?”

The beast grinned from ear hole to ear hole letting out a few low grunts.

“How’s he been doing?” Pruden asked now, his voice getting a little more serious. Bella brushed herself off and stood up, wondering who Pruden could have been referring to.

The creature reared its head towards Bella now, inching closer. It bore its fangs with sever ferocity, threatening to consume her whole. Gaping its mouth open again, the beast went from a friendly giant to an apex predator.

Gulping, Bella stumbled back, as Pruden interjected once more. “Oh that would be my friend Bella. Actually I brought her here for a very specific reason”

The reptile’s eyes blinked open, showing no further signs of aggression as it lightly brought its head towards Bella, with his eyes closed. This time, though, Pruden did not intervene.

He stood back as it got closer to her, dangerously so. Bella started in shock as the animal bowed its head in front of her. A creature of immense power, with muscles the size of pillars bulging under its skin. It had the ability to take out a village in its entirety with no difficulty, yet here it stood, humbling, in front of a mountain girl.

A slight breeze picked up, almost pushing Bella forward, towards the creature. Her heart skipped a beat as she felt her arm slowly inching forward, with no command from her. It was moving on its own.

She reached out and touched its scaly skin. She felt the marks of its body from writhing underwater. She felt the scars of its battles and the beauty of its roughness. She felt empowered to be near such a creature.

And once again, as if nothing had happened at all, she heard the roaring of the waterfall, the guffawing of Pruden. She snapped back to reality as the snake-like thing reared its head back and away from Bella.

“So... is this the old friend you were talking about?” Asking Bella, lightly laughing after the interaction. She was still a little bit shook from the fear, and the adrenaline was definitely beginning to kick in.

“Ah, well that’s only half right. Bella, I want to introduce you to someone I haven’t met in a long time. Although I probably shouldn’t say introduce, as you two are already acquainted.” Bella furrowed her brows. Who did she know that she hadn’t met in a long time? Why would Pruden know anything about it?

“Something very amazing is about to ensue, but it’s twice as ghastly. You may want to step back.” Pruden called the creature towards him once more. It had begun to yip in its low and hollow tone. Still shaking Bella down to the core.

Although, Bella didn’t need to be told twice. She immediately took a good few steps back, all while trying not to get close to the waterfall.

“Alright boy. It’s time for him to return. The world has called upon him once more...  
And with my death, he shall rise once more. Release him.”

Bella gulped, hearing Pruden’s words. Who could he be referring to? Where would he be?

The creature looked down, seemingly serious, as he nodded. He knew what needed to be done. He reared his head back, staring straight up into the sky, as its tongue rolled back into its mouth. The beast stood incredibly still, its mouth still gaping wide open. There was a horrible gust wind that followed out of its mouth, and it reeked. A few plants that were nearby burned right down till there was nothing left. Bella noticed a small bump form around its stomach. This was a perfect sphere that was growing higher and higher.

What was that? Was the dragon puking up something? What was in its stomach? Bella realized she would get her answer soon enough. The bump of a potential sphere travelled higher and higher up to its mouth. It traveled up its neck and into its mouth until she could see a small bump peeking over the edge

“That... is just..... disgusting,” said Pruden with a horrified look on his face. He was pinching his nose as the creature puked up some sort of orb. It was glowing a dim blue and crashed into the ground in front of them. There was a white steam fogging up the inside of the clear film, which sort of resembled a bubble. The beast, bowing its head, shot up into the sky and dove straight down back into the water. It’s job was done.

The bubble popped, and Bella could see a silhouette peeking from behind the mist. It was that of a man. “Ahhh, what the hell!” it called out.

Pruden chuckled as he heaved a sigh of relief. His friend wasn't dead after all. The man, shakily got on all fours and stepped forward. His body was covered in slime and he coughed profusely. The man was dressed from head to toe in black, and had a cape with purple flames emblazoned on it. He was coughing up a storm.

"There you are..." said Pruden, almost teary eyed from this reunion. He seemed weak in the knees as he made his way over to him.

He was old. His hair and beard were completely white and he seemed frail. The man knew the cause of this. His wait in the dragon's belly sucked some life out of him. For his family's security, though, this was a small price to pay. He was willing to do whatever it takes, to keep him away. He'd been hiding for so many years. And, through the fog, as he saw his friend's face approach him, he couldn't believe he was finally out.

"It's you; Wacer!" said Pruden, running up and embracing his friend. Bella's eyes widened as the name hit her like a truck. For an instant, her head got dizzy and her throat closed up. And, as the fog wooshed away, she saw him. It was almost unbelievable. How could he have been here? Was this a mirage? Some kind of joke? This didn't make any sense. Was this the friend that Pruden had been talking about?

"And I'm sure you remember my new friend here," said Pruden, stepping aside to show Bella in clear view. Wacer squinted for a moment, narrowing his vision as he saw her face. She seemed a lot older than the last time that she'd seen her. But of course. He knew exactly who this girl was.

“You’re.... Curmo’s..... Father!” she managed to squeal, with so much excitement that she couldn't say anything else afterwards. Pruden chuckled again. This is how he had imagined Bella to react anyways. There was no way to collect yourself after receiving that kind of shock.

“Bella? You’re here in Endridge? Look how much you’ve grown! It’s almost unbelievable.” Wacer said. He made his way over to her, taking support on Pruden’s shoulders. He embraced Bella, tearing up. Bella choked slightly, putting her other arm around Wacer. He remembered his life back on Belveyon. He could see Bella running in front of his house with Curmo. Curmo!

“Bella, where is he!” he suddenly said, looking her directly in the eye. If she was here, it would make sense that his boy would be too.

“Listen, I know you must have a lot of questions. There’s a lot you need to know, but first you need to take a lay down. You’ve been in the belly of the beast for too long.” said Pruden, laying down Wacer’s body. Now, there was another factor visible. This man was extremely tall, about 8 feet. It was in stark contrast with Curmo, who was in fact a little short for his age.

“You must’ve brought me out for a reason. You must’ve met him,” said Wacer, groaning as he pushed himself back against a flat slab of stone. Even though he wasn’t injured, it almost felt as though he had been through hell and back.

“I did. He came here. He and five others. I didn’t know he was your son, but I trusted him anyway.” said Pruden. “There’s been a war, Wacer. He’s.... He’s back. There’s nothing that’s in the way to stop him anymore. Well, almost.”

“Don’t tell me you sent him out. He knows nothing about combat.”

“Trust me, he’s a lot older and a lot more experienced than you remember. His power is growing. His mother’s blood resides strong within him.”

The mere mention of Curmo’s mother made Wacer’s heart pang in pain. There was nothing else that needed to be said.

“Does he still... does he still have the mark of the shadow knight?” said Wacer.

“Yes. It was beginning to emerge, but you were right. His powers are enough to hold it back. At least for now. When it gets out though, it’s going to cause havoc like none of us have seen. It’s merging with the Purter blood. It didn’t kill him.”

Wacer nodded, feeling pleased, even though he knew a good amount of information that he had already heard.

Bella was staring dumbfounded at the two, barely being able to absorb the information that was being thrown his way. She tried to comprehend what she had heard, but it didn’t make sense that there was just so much that was happening with Curmo. What were these two men saying?

“Do you think I could meet him?” said Wacer with teary eyes. Pruden nodded. He stepped back and pushed Bella with him. “Take her with you too. I’ll be waiting for you to return. I wouldn’t want to intervene in your reunion.” Wacer nodded, glad. It had been so long. Nearly ten years.... He’d lied to his son for that long.

“Do you still remember how it’s done?” Asked Pruden, indicating Bella to lie down with him. He chuckled, as if this were some kind of joke.

“You know I am, old friend.” It felt good to be back. He could feel the sun shining on his face as he closed his eyes. The loud roaring of the waterfall in the background slowly faded away

until there was no noise at all. He was completely in his own head. The brightness of the sun even began to fade, until there was nothing in his senses at all. He tried to move around, but felt hopelessly stuck, a feeling he had had many times back in years of hiding. With a sigh, he finally pulled his arm through, as if it had just gotten unstuck from a wall. He chuckled in relief. Unlike back then, this was his domain. He wasn't trapped. In fact, he was more free than ever before.

His vision even began to come back as he could see his own body, or at least his soul. Next to him was Bella. He was bringing her in with him.

"Not this again!" said Bella, as they both suddenly began to fall.

Wacer bellowed loudly. "So you've done this before, have you?" They were diving down what could be described as a dark well in complete darkness except for directly in front of them. Wacer could feel the wind on his face again. He spread his arms and breathed in deeply. Next to him, Bella was screeching at the top of her lungs and flailing.

In the distance, he could see the ground approaching them fast and faster. They both began to slow down until their feet met the complete darkness of the place below. Although, now his heart was beginning to thump harder in his chest. In mere moments, he would meet Curmo again. He was going to appear in front of him. He had dreamt of this moment for so long, and it was finally about to happen.

His palms were sweaty and his eyes were darting from side to side. "Umm... could I ask what's happening?" Asked Bella, gritting her teeth in shock as she brushed herself off.

"I believe Pruden may have shown you this power when you traveled inside someone's head. Although, I have sharpened this technique to an extent further than the wizard. I am able to connect with my curse. You'll see soon enough."



Suddenly, from behind them, they could hear the soft stepping of footsteps. The soft stepping of bare feet on concrete ground. Occasionally, there was the snap of branches of the crunching of leaves, which confused Bella even more. In all its serenity, this place was chaotic, jumping for one existing to another. Her senses were all messed up. Looking around, she stepped closer to Wacer, fearing what was about to step out of the shadow.

It was getting louder and closer now, making progress with every passing second. What came into view was something Bella couldn't believe. It was the creature they had seen in Curmo's head. It had the same disfigured body covered in a dark slime. On his head were two glowing red eyes which seemed like heated coal. Although, instead of the smile that the beast had donned the first time Bella had seen it, it had a scowl. Not an angry one. The creature seemed more confused than anything else.

"Hey, It's me," said Wacer, spreading his arms out, patting his chest.

"THAT THING TRIED TO KILL ME! DON'T LET IT GET ANY CLOSER!" screamed Bella. The creature recognized her, giving the girl a small, sinister wave, its indifferent smile once again crossing its face again.

"Oh, so were inside Curmo's head before? I apologize for anything the creature might have done. It has been instructed to ward off any intruders into Curmo's head. But he won't do anything to us, not that he can anyway. Watch." He stepped up to the creature, pressing a hand against some invisible wall.

It was something blocking him from them. "Since he's too far, the creature, or its apparition cannot interact with us directly. There's a wall that separates our literal existences."

It was true. The creature tried to touch Wacer too, but was unable to.

“It’s time pal. I want to see him.” the beast nodded, seeming to understand. And just like that, he began to melt away. The once dark room seemed to fill in with light, and Both Bella and Wacer could feel a tingling sensation. It was a darkness ripping through the air and the midst of it, a small bright spot, which grew more and more until they could see a boy standing on the other side.

Bella gasped, holding her breath, as she took a weary step towards the brightness. The boy stumbled falling to the ground, but he felt as if he knew where he was. As if he’d been there before. He breathed in deeply, and his form began to come clear. It was Curmo. He stood, in the rags of clothes that had become of his royal garments.

“How... Did he bring me back? Pruden should still be back in End-,” before he could finish his sentence, Curmo saw her and a wave of Euphoria erupted through his veins. He felt slightly light headed but could make out that Bella was standing right in front of him.

Curmo walked forward, taking a few wary steps, before his right foot hit some sort of obstacle. He reached forward and touched the air in front of him, only to realize there was some kind of glass material blocking him and Bella on the other side.

Bella stepped forward too, putting her hand on this glass where Curmo’s was. She was in tears. Both of them were too shook to speak.

“Bella... I - I never expected to see you,” he managed to say. “Are... Are you safe?” Bella nodded, mustering a smile.

“I was so worried. I was so.... So worried about you!” she said. “Curmo, where are you?”

Curmo wiped his eyes, taking a deep breath. He didn’t want to worry Bella, but he had to tell her. “I’m back at home. We went to Belveyon. The Viserwen army is here.”

“No, you must leave from there at once!” said Wacer, stepping forward, startling Curmo. After seeing Bella, he hadn’t seen anyone else nearby. But this man, it was almost as if Curmo had seen him somewhere before. He squinted, trying to make out his facial features.

“Don’t you recognize me?” he said, with a slight smile. “How could you... I’ve been gone for a long time.”

Curmo sucked in a breath, staring at the man... Staring at his father. This felt as if it were some sort of dream. He pinched himself, trying desperately to wake up, but to no avail. Besides, he knew deep inside that this wasn’t a dream. It was too real.

So then it was true. The man standing in front of him right there was his father. The one he hasn’t seen in nearly a decade. “I can’t imagine the hardships you’ve been through. Everything you had to endure because I wasn’t there for you. Three lifetimes of torment wouldn’t be enough to appease this heinous crime.” Wacer was in tears now. He sank to his knees. Bella placed a gentle hand over his shoulder.

“I can’t believe it. Where... all this time.... Where have you been?” Curmo asked, raising his voice.

Wiping away his tears, Wacer stood up. “The man who you are to see. His name is Gylbard. He is a man of ruthless ambition and anger. I was barely able to escape him. But, he had means of tracking me. He was able to find me wherever I went, so I had to take your mother and leave. We left under the care of Belveyon, knowing you would be taken care of.”

“Is my mother... is she?” Curmo asked with caution. Wacer nodded.

“Your mother is alive, son. She left sometime after my arrival in Endridge. Her escort had taken her to the Forest of the Reborn... that’s her home.”

Curmo just didn't know how to respond. There was too much information for him to absorb. He felt as dumbfounded as when they had met Pruden the first time or when he had gotten a lesson from Malarkey. He just didn't know how to feel.

“But how do you know so much about this Gylbard person? I just learned about him.” said Curmo, remembering the information his father had told him.

“That’s because, Curmo, I am from Viserwen. Me and your mother had a family there. We lived in the royal palace and even had a child.” Curmo sucked in his breath.

“Was I born in... Viserwen?” he asked wearily. Wacer shook his head.

“No boy. You were our second child. In the northern continent, I had a beautiful daughter who was playful and daring. Her entire life she spent second to Gyblard. She followed him like a puppy. Even on that day... When I left with your mother, I only did it to protect my daughter’s life. Poor Virago.”

“Wait, what did you say!?” shouted Curmo, startling Wacer and Bella both. “Your daughter is... Virago? As in, she’s my sister?”.

“Curmo, do you know her? Have you met Virago?” Bella looked confused as she started at Curmo.

“We both have,” he responded grimly. “She tried to kill us back when we picked up Felix. I’m with her right now. She... I guess she seems to have changed. We’re trying to kill Gylbard.”

“She’s alright? Thank god,” Wacer responded, seemingly forgetting the part where Virago had nearly killed Curmo. “Curmo, she was trained by the greatest swordsmen in all of Viserwen. Her archery skills rival all others. There is no tactical mind more powerful than hers. She was superior to Gylbard on all levels. And yes, she is your sister.”

Suddenly, the world around them started to crumble. Wacer grabbed his chest as he fell to the ground. Both Bella and Curmo tried to grab each other, once again falling prey to the invisible wall that blocked their path.

“What’s happening!” Bella shouted.

Through gritted teeth, Wacer responded, “I believe it's the mental stage. I cannot hold it up as long as I used to. My time in the dragon has weakened my power.” Curmo didn’t even bother to ask.

“Listen son, before I leave. Stay with Virago. Please, the both of you, stay away from Gylbard. He’s more dangerous than you think.”

Curmo nodded, trying to get in all the information he could.

“And one more thing,” he shouted, over the roar of what sounded like a tidal wave. “I love-.”

And the connection ended. Curmo shot up breathing heavily in the field where he had fallen asleep. He was surrounded by everyone, the moon directly above him.

“Curmo!” shouted Felix, a bit too loudly, for which he got hit on the head by Sable.

“Quiet stupid,” she said. “Well I guess he didn’t die after all.”

Curmo looked around frantically, drenched in sweat. His eyes eventually locked on Virago, who was holding his right arm. Without thinking, he hugged her tightly around the waist, sobbing like nothing anyone had ever seen.

And after a moment’s hesitation, she hugged him back.

## **CHAPTER 20: Reckoning**

Curmo felt relief and a sense of competition as he was brought back to his reality. Everything he'd known was a lie. He had a family. His father was alive. His mother was alive. And Virago.... well she was his sister.

"What the hell?" whispered Sable as she stared in bewilderment. Everyone was speechless. Virago furrowed her brows. She awkwardly patted Curmo's back. But her lower lip was quivering. Partially from the cold, partially from coming to the same realization that Curmo had probably had.

"Virago you're -," Curmo started.

"I know, kid." she responded, cutting him off. Curmo stepped back, finally getting a good look at her. Unlike himself, she had straight jet black hair and a sleek face. No one in the world could have guessed they were related.

"Since when?" Curmo inquired.

"When we met on that beach. My Ferox was refusing to kill you at first. It hesitated. You were a Purter. The only other one I'd ever met in my life. They are strictly forbidden from ever leaving the forest of the Reborn until they'd become tales of the past. But, there was a strange occurrence that happened around 20 years ago. A Purter woman escaped from the island and made her way to Visweren. Our mother."

Curmo sucked in his breath. Everyone around them was silent as well, finally realizing what had gotten into Curmo.

"And when you used the power of the curse, I knew for sure. Our father is a mage. A practitioner of dark magic nonetheless. On the day they left Viserwen all those years ago, I remember our mother had been pregnant. She was pregnant with you. To protect you before they

were even born, our father cursed you with a beast that would protect you. In reality, the creature that resides in your head feels no compassion to save your life, but only wants to preserve its own.”

Curmo nodded, lightly touching the back of his head. It felt normal, but what did that word even mean anymore.

“And when you fell unconscious right now, I knew it must’ve been him. Gylbard had told me my father might return one day. Return to take revenge for everything that happened. I guess he’s back. And he called your beast to talk to you.” Virago explained, slowly standing up, helping Curmo up as well.

“Are you like me?” Curmo asked the obvious question.

Virago shook her head. “Whilst I am a Purter, the magic that resides within you doesn’t flow through my veins. In fact, you shouldn’t have that power either. The magic of the Purters is controlled by the elders in the forest of the reborn. When our mother left the lands, it meant her children wouldn’t be able to access that hidden power. But, the magic of the creature,” she poked Curmo’s head, “seems to have awoken the abilities, even created some you weren’t meant to have.”

Curmo nodded, taking it all in. He was different after all. Not just from those in his village or kingdom, but maybe the only one like him in the entire world. The magic of pure darkness and of life in a blend, powering each other and canceling out all the same.

Next to them Felix’s mouth was hanging wide open, for which he got an elbow to the ribs from Sable, who quickly muttered, “don’t be rude.”

“Curmo the crazy lady that tried to kill us is your sister?” He said.

Virago rolled her eyes. “You know, you don’t have to keep bringing that up. I said I was sorry didn’t I?” They were staring each other down all while Damia was trying to pry them apart. Curmo stood alone, numb to it all.

“That’s not the only thing,” he said, to which everyone quieted up. “I also saw her. Bella.” Felix smiled remembering her warm face. Even Curmo smiled slightly, despite all the emotions he was feeling.

“She talked to me. She was alright. Her and Pruden are-,” Curmo began.

“Wait Pruden? Like the wizard Pruden?” Virago cut in. “The girl that was with you back then... is hanging out with the most powerful being in all the lands?”

“It’s not that crazy. The old man can barely stay awake for more than an hour at a time,” chiming in Sable.

“Yes,” Curmo answered. “He’s training her to be the next wizard.”

“Wait, is that really true,” Virago said with excitement. There was a sense of astonishment in her voice.

Curmo was confused by her reaction. What was so special about what he had said?

“No you don’t understand. Gylbard’s entire plan revolved around Pruden’s power dying off with him. He’s lost his advantage. Even if we were to fail today, there would still be hope for the western continent.”

It then hit Curmo just how important of a role Bella played in the future of their home. She was going to be a power to be reckoned with.

“It doesn’t matter,” responded Curmo. “Because we won’t let it get to that. Bella will never have to fight anyone. We’re going to end this right now.”



Looking around, everyone was nodding. They were ready. No matter how difficult it would be, they would do it. Looking up, Curmo saw the full moon. He saw the silhouette of a tree. A pair of birds were sitting on a nest, their heads intertwined. They stood over a couple of baby chicks. For them, this was just a normal night. There was nothing special about what was happening. By tomorrow, nothing would have changed for them.

Curmo, alternatively realized nothing would be the same again. He yearned, for the slightest moment, to go back into his home and jump into bed. He willed to sleep and forget anything was even happening around the world. But then he snapped back to reality.

“Alright,” said Damia, with a deep sigh. “Whenever you’re ready, we’ll move out.”  
Virago nodded.

“Alright kid, you’re the one that’s lived here. You should know this place like the back of your hand. We’ll follow you. Curmo nodded, slowly walking which built to a low jog, this time heading down the slope towards Bella’s house instead of his usual shortcut. If they were to face any adversaries, he’d rather not get caught off guard in the woods. Those dentron were scary creatures, but they were predictable. They wouldn’t be looking for anyone in the open.

And, it was just their luck, as the majority of the scouts had fallen asleep. It was an eerie sort of silence. If it was this silent here, the majority of the scouts must’ve been asleep. Looking back, Curmo saw everyone was keeping up. Virago and Damia’s heads were on a swivel. Behind them, Sable and Felix were clutching each other, too scared to even keep their open, but too prideful to stay behind.

Smiling, Curmo looked back across the street as they passed Bella’s house. The windows had been boarded up and there was no indication of life anywhere near the house. A part of him

wanted to make a stop and tell them that Bella was alright, but that wasn't a luxury he could afford at the moment.

And so he kept on. The small distance to the marketplace felt like more than an hour. This reminded him of the escape he had made with Akuldra. They had barely escaped the jaws of the dentron back then and had only had hope because of Zenvor. Now, they had no such luxury.

Virago slightly picked up her pace, matching Curmo's. "The camp is going to be heavily guarded. The only way we're going to get in is through an opening. Damia knows how to do that."

"I have one other friend," said Damia, explaining her plan. "There's a man on my way over to Endridge. He's supposed to be keeping guard tonight. He'll definitely let us past."

"Can we trust him?" inquired Curmo.

"If anything, we can subdue him. He's weak. If it wasn't obvious, Gylbard seems to be taking security too lightly. I guess he doesn't see any potential threats to him at the moment."

Virago found this unsettling. This was the man who had stolen the throne back from her father as a child. His mind calculated every possible scenario long before it even happened. Why now then, would he decide to lower his guard? In enemy territory? Since there was nothing she could prove, Virago kept her mouth shut as they trudged forward. The dentron had once again shifted to overlooking the edge of the town to make sure no one got in or out, which Curmo had remembered from his last escape.

Now the only difficulty would be getting past the guard and Damia's friend. As they approached the town's square, Virago pulled Curmo and the others behind a low hut. They had a

clear view of the camp, and sure enough, there were posts set up periodically around the camp. Although, inside the camp, they could hear a commotion.

Just across the wall, they could hear a man pleading, and the soldiers near him were jeering and laughing. Curmo craned his neck to see who it was, and sucked in a breath when he realized.

The man standing in front of the guards was none other than Muralen, his guardian ever since his parents had left. Curmo looked at him teary eyed. “I know him,” he said meekly.

Damia looked over at the man too. “Oh no,” she muttered.

“What? What’s wrong?” said Curmo.

“They’re... They’re going to kill him. These men are ruthless. They know no shame. They would even cut down an old man begging for help.”

“Please sir!” Muralen’s voice echoed throughout the valley. “We have no food and everyone fears stepping out of their home. I am no man to beg, but we will die if nothing is done!”

“Get up ya ol bastard!” laughed one of the guards. He was tall and held a spear in his right hand. “I guess you could say I’m feeling generous t’night. Go home, before I change my mind!” He laughed, landing a kick clean on Muralen’s chest.

Curmo felt a jolt of anger spring across his body, but Virago quickly grabbed his arm, holding him back. She shook his head. He knew she was right. They couldn’t afford to give up their cover. Everything relied on complete stealth.

Muralen got back up. He had no fear of these men. What he cared about was the protection of his people, and he would maintain this at any cost. “Sir, I do not plan to leave without your help. People will die if we don’t get them food fast.”

The soldier cracked his neck. “I was hopin you’d say that. Truth is, I was going ta kill you either way.” The soldier raised the spear over his head, forming an arc. The grip around Curmo’s arm tightened as he watched everything in slow motion.

In an instant, the man’s spear burrowed into the ground. It just barely grazed Muralen’s body. He had not wavered for even a moment. But, the man had not missed either.

Another soldier stood in their way. A much shorter one, with an oversized helmet over his head. His blade had blocked the spear. He’d saved Muralen’s life. Curmo fell backwards in relief. His heart had stopped for a moment back then.

“An what the hell do ya think yer doing?” said the drunk soldier.

The shorter man responded, “unnecessary violence will cause an uproar amongst the people. Even the meekest of squirrels will fight tooth and nail if you corner it. The last thing we need is to suppress another revolt from these people.”

The drunk man hiccuped. “I don know what yer talking about, but just stay outta my way. Next time, yer going ta die for certain. The short man then gave Muralen a loaf of bread and sent him on his way.

Curmo wanted so desperately for him to have looked over his shoulders. Just to get a glimpse of Curmo. But there was no chance of that.

The other man, though, seemed to have noticed them in an instant, and he was making his way over to them.

Virago quickly gripped her sword and held out an arm. Smiling, she said, “I guess this should be fun.” But just as quickly, Damia stopped her.

“That’s my friend I was talking about, ” she quickly responded, a grin on her face. “His name is Birsha.”

Birsha made his way over to them in quick strides, but each step he took was with confidence. He wasn’t very tall but there was a presence surrounding him that seemed almost suffocating.

Curmo slowly stepped out of the shadows as he approached. And so they stood in front of each other. Curmo was looking down on him, with an intense stare. There was something about this man, something unsettling. The air around them was thick. From the corner of his eye, Curmo could see Birsha tightening the grip around his sword.

His stance was perfect, one foot just parley in front of the other, slightly tilted to the left. He was ready for any situation, attack or defence. It was almost as if he were in the enemy territory instead of them.

They both glared at each other and everyone around them seemed nervous. Everything had fallen silent, as if even the birds were too afraid to speak.

Then, in an instant, breaking off this trance, Damia stepped forward. With a cheery grin she said, “Hey Birsha!”. His eyes never moved off of Curmo. There were not many people in this world that he thought were intimidating, and even now, he wasn’t afraid of this boy, but there was something unsettling about him. Something that would’ve made him squirm, and he knew exactly why...

“I-,” Curmo started.

“Hello Damia,” Birsha cut in. He broke his gaze from Curmo, also stopping any potential conversation.

“These were the people that I was talking about. I hope you’re planning to stay quiet about this.”

The man looked around, and his eyes slowly landed on Virago. She was narrowing her eyes, and seemed awfully suspicious. He could sense her malicious intent. Any second now, she would unsheath her sword and strike down Birsha. He just needed to say the right things.

“It’s not like I have much of a choice,” he said with a chuckle. He bashfully rubbed the back of his neck whilst playing his sword on the ground in front of them. He was acting differently than he had before and Damia seemed to pick up on this, but she didn’t think much of it.

Felix stepped forward now. “Ummm... so I assume you know why we’re here,” he said. Birsha looked up and down Felix, sending chills down his spine.

“I thought you were only planning to bring two people,” he said to Damia.

“They’re his friends. Don’t worry they’re strong,” she looked over Felix one more time. “Well atleast most of us.” Felix glared at her, but that seemed to be enough for Birsha.

“I have been patrolling the west sector of the town. Everyone is drunk practically to death. Inside there is very little security as it is. If you follow me, I’ll take you to him.” He seemed intent. There was a firmness in his voice, which was masked over by a quirky smile and chuckles from time to time. It was as if he was faking the entirety of his personality.

“Why?” asked Sable. Birsha’s ears perked up.

“Excuse me?” he responded.

“Why are you helping us? You are the ones that attacked. There is nothing that you have to gain from helping us, but you still are. Why?”

The girl was smarter than she was letting on. She seemed to be as perceptive to his intent as Virago.

“Why am I helping? Because, I want a change in the world. I always have. I had a talk with Damia today. Neither one of us have ever killed anyone before. My entire life, I lived as a cook, doing whatever was asked of me. Never once did I question my superiors. When I was enlisted into this fight, I went willingly. Even now as I stand before you, there is a burning mark on my flesh that relays the image of the lost empire. But if there is a chance. Even the smallest glimmer of a possibility that I could be freed of this pain, then I will take it gladly.”

Sable averted her gaze. The man’s words touched her. There was no way he could be lying.

Damia turned and faced the rest of them. “Alright... So what do you think?”

They all looked at each other, all of them eventually looking over to Virago. They were waiting for her call. She kept on staring at the man. But there seemed to be something that she thought she knew. Something the other’s didn’t seem to be picking up on. But, if she revealed her cards right now, they would all be dead.

If she was right, they were all already caught. On the other hand, if this man was who he said he was, then they would only get to kill Gylbard. All her choices seemed to be pointing towards the same realization.

“We’ll follow you,” she said grimly. Curmo nodded, turning around to see Birsha already on the move. The rest of them followed behind quietly. What he was saying must have been true.

There wasn't a noise in the whole camp. Large tents were placed periodically, with a bonfire going on in the middle.

This wasn't the entire army. They could all tell. That meant they had already begun their invasion across the continent. That was scary just to think about. They were all afraid to make even the smallest sound so as to not alert the guards. Every time someone stepped on a leaf, the entire group would freeze up for an instant, before continuing their way.

For what felt like an hour, they kept on walking to the center of the camp until finally they came upon a large wooden cabin. The largest one amongst all that were there. Birsha looked back to make sure everyone had been following them. Once he did a quick head count, they all stepped inside. Curmo first, followed by Felix and Sable, and finally Damia and Virago.

Virago's heart was racing at a million miles an hour. This could have all very well been a trap, but the instant she stepped inside, she breathed a slow sigh. The lights were dimmed, but there wasn't a person in sight. The only thing in there was a giant bed. The edges were laced with animal fur and propped up about a foot into the air with 4 sturdy stands.

On that bed, they could see a lump under the blankets. It was breathing calmly and peacefully, completely unaware of the presence around it. They all looked at each other with a mutual understanding. Under the blanket was Gylbard.

They could feel a presence surrounding them. Birsha stared at them with intent. Which one of them actually had it in them to do it? Which one would commit the crime?

Virago and Damia looked amongst each other. Virago nodded. This was her curse to exterminate. It was her destiny to do this. She looked over at Curmo, who passed her her blade.



Virago remembered all the time she had spent with Gylbard. She had stood by him no matter what. When her parents left, he was the only she had left. She felt compelled to stand by him. But, despite everything, he'd tried to kill her. In that instant, she'd known everything why believed in was a lie.

But did she actually have it in her to kill him? Could she really drive her sword into the heart of the one she had once.... Well the one she had once loved?

But with a sigh, Virago inched her way closer to his bed. She unsheathed her sword and took a deep breath. With a sigh, she closed her eyes and raised the blade above her head.

He still lay there, calmly asleep. And finally, Virago drove the blade straight down. They didn't hear a sound. Just the thud of a body hitting the floor.

When they all looked up at what Virago had done, they saw the fallen body of Birsha on the ground, bleeding out, with his armour soaked in red. Damia patted Virago on the back.

"What was that?" Curmo whispered, his eyes wide in shock.

"Gylbard was disguised as this man," Damia said, clarifying the situation. "I knew it the instant Virago described him. There was no mistaking Birsha had been trying to trick us. When Virago finally saw him, she gave me a signal that she thought the same thing."

Damia then stepped forward, slowly taking off Birsha's helmet. When she pulled it off, Damia gasped as she stumbled backwards. In fact, fear spread through everyone's veins as they saw what was inside.

The armour held a corpse, but one that had been dead a long time. It was a young attractive man. Maybe in his late twenties. He has strikingly light white hair and a peaceful look on his face. But, by Damia and Virago's expressions, it was obvious this man wasn't Gylbard.

Virago whipped her head around to see a man standing next to the bed, both of his arms behind his back. He was a slightly shorter person than even the Birsha imposter. In the blink of an eye, Virago picked up her sword and charged at him. The man didn't even seem bothered. He just barely moved his head an inch to the side as the blade passed his ear, not even nicking him. Virago's sword got stuck on the wooden wall. Without stopping to pull it out, Virago threw everything she had at Gylbard.

Her punches were wild and desperate, and she couldn't believe how furious she was. But, Gylbard dodged her just as easily as he ever had. And then, in a single fluid motion, the back of his fist jammed right into Virago's side, sending her flying through the wall at an immense speed. Outside, they could see the rest of the camp had awoken and were surrounding Gylbard's cabin.

The first words they heard out of his mouth were, "Pathetic. As always. You couldn't even die properly when I asked you to," he said, with not an ounce of hatred in his words. In fact, Curmo could sense no emotions in him altogether. He was a completely cold and unfeeling human, if you could even call him that.

Virago groaned as she lay on her back. Through blurry vision, she saw the rest of the soldiers making a circle around her, including Mortek. For a moment, he showed a sign of regret, before turning away.

"I wanted to see how far you would go," said Gylbard. "I wanted to see if you had it in you to kill me."

"How did you even know I was coming?" groaned Virago.

"Damia mentioned it of course. Not that I wouldn't have prepared for it anyway. Your emotional and rash. After realizing you weren't dead, I knew you'd come for me eventually. I

guess this was sooner than I expected though. May I presume you ended up in Belveyon on a whim?"

His crisp and clear voice echoed throughout the mountains and down the valleys.

"What I wasn't expecting was that he'd be here. Not that I ever thought much of it anyway," he indicated towards Curmo, now fully turning his attention to him.

"So you're his son. The lawful prince of Viserwen." That title didn't feel right to Curmo. It didn't feel as though Gylbard was even talking about him. But he now knew it to be true.

"I thought Wacer's child had died a long time ago. I had tried locating you and your mother. But there was no indication of your life form anywhere on the map. That could have meant one thing. Either you were dead or had ended up in the cradle of your motherland, the cursed Forest of the Reborn. Its magical boundaries surpass even those of my skill. But I now know there was something else. Wacer... he hid you. He placed a curse on you, maybe even awakening the powers you possess as a Purtur. He tried to keep you safe from me."

The irony of the situation was splendid. The man Wacer had tried to protect Curmo from his entire life happened to meet him the day Wacer was brought back from his slumber.

"Our meeting was supposed to be spectacular," said Gylbard. Curmo could hear every word he said, but still felt a million miles away, as if this were all happening to a different person. "Even though I am... disappointed, there is something about you that is unsettling. You hold no fear. Be that in bravery or stupidity, this is a quality I don't like. I can see your friends trembling behind you. Every man and woman in my army doesn't dare to meet my eye. But you and your sister feel no fear whatsoever. Maybe it runs in the family."

He indicated with his fingers for the rest of them to follow him as he stepped outside. Around ten soldiers all wielding weapons stepped forward behind them, poking them with spears to step forward and follow the man.

Curmo reluctantly raised his hands and walked forward. He helped Virago up with one arm as they stepped outside. She was still clutching her side. This Gylbard character was a lot stronger than they had anticipated.

There was a pin drop silence over the entire camp. Not a soul was stirring as they all marched forwards, to what would probably be their deaths.

Lookin back, Curmo made eye contact with Felix and Sable who had been trudging quietly behind him. He gave them an apologetic look, to which Felix smiled meagerly.

“Give it a rest with that will you,” whispered Sable. “We all chose to follow you. No one makes decisions for me.” This was maybe the nicest gesture Sable had ever given him, and it hurt Curmo inside even more.

They had all gotten captured because of his stupid decision to come back to Belveyon. Why did he care to scout the region? Why did he have to bring his friends into this mess?

“There is someone I would like you to meet,” Gylbard said, snapping Curmo back to reality. He looked around at the marketplace, which was barely recognizable now. A cold and fast breeze whizzed through the air, bringing with it the smell of frost. Curmo’s fingers were starting to numb a little, even though he had grown up in these conditions.

Ahead of them, two guards brought forward a man bound in chains. He had a long beard and raggedy hair covering his face.

“That’s the second wizard, Aelnoq,” Virago explained, still clenching her teeth from the pain. They all stared dumbfounded at the presence of the mighty wizard. He had been brought down to being a prisoner amongst these savages. His face and hair were caked with mud and dirt and he seemed deathly thin. But even then, the man radiated an energy that seemed powerful, almost overpowering to just be around.

“Yes Virago, that is correct, although I find it hard to believe you can still recognize him. This is the man you can thank for the corpse reanimation earlier.”

Then another man bound in chains was brought from inside another tent. The instant Curmo saw him, he ran as fast as he could. The guard tried to stop him, but Gylbard raised a hand.

“Muralen!” he exclaimed as he hugged the old man, nearly knocking him over.

Muralen looked at him confused. “Curmo, my boy. I went to check on you after those things invaded but you were gone. I thought you had gotten out of Belveyon.” He hugged Curmo back.

Curmo could smell the harsh fragrance of tobacco and sawdust on Muralen’s apron. For the faintest of a moment, he felt safe, before Gylbard’s voice echoed across the mountains again.

“Ah, so you two are acquainted. I could tell from the way you acted when he was about to get killed. So you must have known him growing up in this.... quaint place.”

For a moment, a surge of anger spiked in Curmo’s body. Every inch of him wanted nothing more than to kill Gylbard. This was his home that he’d invaded.

Gylbard coldly stared into Curmo’s eyes. “I know boy. I know the kind of anger that you are feeling. That’s the same anger I’ve felt many times, looking at what my father did to our

nation. We're the same, you and I. All the while, you're helpless aren't you?" he started getting closer to Curmo.

"The curse is still dormant. This is interesting. You seem to have a greater control over the beast than you think. So I presume a trigger would be needed to bring it out. Very well, I'll do what must be done."

With a simple gesture, a few of the other guards restrained Curmo, pulling him back towards the others. Curmo could barely speak. His mind was blank and all he could feel or think was anger and hatred that burned so strong.

Another couple of guards made their way over to Muralen and pushed him to the ground.

And finally, Curmo's voice cracked as he spoke, "Wha-- what do you think you're doing!" And his roar echoed over the valley. Even then, Gylbard seemed unimpressed. He had to go further.

He made his way over to Muralen, and without a moment of hesitation, sliced his head clean off.

There was no sound. No noise. Muralen made no noise as he was killed. His head rolled before finally coming to a rest as his body bled out right in front of them. Curmo was silent. Not a sound escaped his mouth. His eyes watered as he clenched his fists. The others stared at him. Sable buried her head into Felix's shoulder, dreading having to look at the vile act that was committed. Virago and Damia turned away. They'd seen many people die just like this in front of Gylbard. But for some reason, this felt different. This felt personal.

Gylbard himself snatched up a shield and moved behind Aelnoq. He knew he'd done it now. He'd triggered the beast. His eyes sparkled with excitement. It wasn't often that he'd

encountered a creature as powerful as Curmo. If it were just the curse protecting him, it wouldn't even have been that different. But the amplification of his powers as a Purtur was a different story.

Curmo could barely see through the water in his eyes. He remembered the fun he had had working for Muralen. He remembered the hot Summers where even the mountain snow would melt and Muralen and him would be the only ones working out in the barn. He remembered Zenvor and how they'd raised her. Curmo's hands were trembling. Slowly, something sinister and dark was filling him up.

In that instant, everything in front of him went dark and all he could hear was laughing. He was back in his mind. But this was somehow different. He hadn't been brought here by anyone else. He couldn't feel any other presence besides his own, and yet, there was something walking towards him. Something that looked strikingly resembling someone he'd seen before. The laughing continued.

It bounced off the walls and penetrated his soul. It was a soul chilling feeling of complete darkness and at the same time of pure power. The person walking towards him finally took form. It was as if he was looking into a mirror. It was him, but it didn't look like him. This, *thing* had a wide grin on his face and his eyes were completely black. He was laughing maniacally.

"So I guess we're here again," he said.

"Where... what is going on? Are you the curse inside me?" said Curmo.

"Oh? This is interesting. For some reason this time is different isn't it?" dark Curmo responded.

"What do you mean this time? What's different?" asked Curmo.

“You already know that I’ve taken over before, but you seem to forget meeting me first. I can’t be let out without your permission. You’re the only one who can let me take over. The first time was in Endridge, where that damn wizard got in the way before I got to have any fun. And then, back in the forest, you only gave me some time before turning back. Every single time, you seemed to have some kind of memory loss, forgetting we even know each other. But this time, you seem to hold more memories. Your consciousness is still intact. I’m curious, what happened out there? What was so horrific that you couldn’t even forget it in your subconsciousness?”

Curmo looked down, suddenly remembering the face of Muralen’s head rolling on the grass in front of him. He gasped as he fell backwards. “He... He killed Muralen.” That desperate feeling from before overcame him again. Curmo grit his teeth.

“Oh! Oh ho ho ho hahahahahaha!” The creature laughed again. “That bastard really did it! He’s the one I was supposed to protect you against isn’t he?”

Curmo stood up, breathing heavily. His cheeks were glowing red and an unnatural wind was blowing in the space. Dark Curmo spread his hands and spun in the whirlwind. This was his fuel. This feeling of rage and fury. He was going to unleash his wrath.

“Just say the word! Let all of me free!” Dark Curmo shouted over the sound of the storm. “What do you want! Tell me what you want!” he shouted, still laughing. Curmo could barely speak, but he looked up, staring at the man.

Suddenly, he remembered all the times that he’d been in this exact position. Every single time, he’d given the same response. *Just for a moment. Don’t unleash all your power.* He had always been scared of making a mistake with this creature’s powers. But he finally understood why.



Dark Curmo wasn't another curse. It wasn't another being or parasite lodged inside him. It literally was him. It was a manifestation of his fury. His anger strengthened the beast, and at the moment, it seemed more powerful than it had ever been before. But, at that moment, Curmo didn't care about anything else. He was willing to do whatever.

"Beast, I lend you my power," said Curmo. His own body glowed bright green, seeping into Dark Curmo, who seemed to grow bigger and bigger. Dark Curmo breathed in. He turned the magic of pure life into his own power. The original source of magic itself. This was good stuff.

"Yes boy! That's good! Now say it!"

In that moment, everything once again went completely silent. "You asked me what I wanted," said Curmo. "Right now, I only want one thing. Kill Gylbard, ruler of Viserwen, in the most gruesome way you possibly can. Unleash all our power! Make him pay for everything he's ever done! Beast... I RELEASE ALL OF YOU!"

In almost an instant, Curmo fell asleep. He had given up all the control over his body. Everything that was going to happen now would be taken care of by the curse.

Outside, they all stared at Curmo's slumped body. Virago placed a hand in front of everyone else. "No matter what, don't step forward," she said. She didn't know what Gylbard was trying to do, but he'd triggered an unstable magic user as powerful as Curmo. Curmo wasn't asleep. Something horrible was going to happen. Gylbard had poked the beast. He was about to get exactly what he deserved.

Curmo's head suddenly whipped up. He could feel his surroundings, but was definitely in the back seat. A scary presence emerged from the ground. Curmo's face once again donned a

smile stretching from ear to ear. The ground below him felt heavier, and the guards that were holding him back felt like rag dolls. In this moment, there weren't many beings in existence that could even hope to rival his strength.

"Well there you have it," said Dark Curmo. "He actually set me free." With a simple flick of his arm, the creature sent the guards flying back with unimaginable speed. They all died the instant they made contact with the cabins, which crumbled under the force. Dark Curmo cracked his neck. Looking down at his hands, he noticed the veins running through his arms were darkening themselves.

This was the first time he'd felt so alive and free. It was as if Curmo had let him out into the world properly for the first time. Cracking his neck, he made eye contact with Gylbard. "Ahh, so it's you again. You angered the boy. You chose to bring me out. I can't for the life of me imagine why. Didn't you get a good taste of my power last time?"

Gylbard was impressed. He was actually talking to the curse. This was the second time this kind of power had come before him. The first time had been with Wacer all those years ago. From all the memories he would've liked to forget, there was nothing comparable to that.

"Ay beast. I have called you out," said Gylbard, cautiously stepping forward.

"That's too reckless, even for you," Dark Curmo responded, moving forward himself. Gylbard stopped in his tracks. The steadiness of his voice was beginning to crack as this presence made its way towards him.

"I wish to free you. Even the Curse of the Shadow Knight can be freed from its vessel, can it not?" said Gylbard. He'd shown all his cards. His only hope now was if this curse would listen to him.

“You mistake my powers, boy,” it responded, to which Gylbard was taken aback. “You think I am a shadow knight as that was my form the last time we met.” It chuckled, but even then, the creature could feel Curmo’s anger rising. It wouldn’t be long before it would take over him himself. Then he would have his fun properly.

At that moment, the wind started blowing again, as it had in Curmo’s mind, and Dark Curmo began to emit a faint glow, bright red. His irises slowly clouded with a molten orange.

“You. You’re no longer a shadow knight. You’re a blood knight?” said Gylbard. Virago’s head snapped towards him. If she had ever heard fear in Gylbard’s voice, this was probably the closest she was ever going to get. And for good reason.

“A blood knight,” Mortek exclaimed. “A curse bound in death. Wacer would have needed to kill another for that. He sealed the beast with death.” He stepped backwards, in awe of the power of this creature. The wind was picking up and small scraps of debris were projected in the air. The clouds above them opened. The heavens themselves were watching.

“It’s time Gylbard. It’s time for your reckoning.” Surprisingly, the creature lost its smile and stared right at Gylbard. His skin started tracked and glowed bright red. The ground under him was beginning to give way. Even the Earth wasn’t able to hold back such raw power.

“Aelnoq, protect me. Even to the death if you must,” shouted Gylbard over the wind.

The instant those words were spoken, the man stood up. The feeble looking wizard now had a presence of power himself. His shackles popped off as he raised his arms. The air cackled around them and heated up. The heaven roared in an uproar that shook the very foundation of the marketplace.

Gylbard and the rest of the guards stepped back, as did Virago and the others. Once Aelnoq was sure there was no one in the way, he closed his eyes and a barrier formed around them. The Earth started cracking and molten lava rose up from underneath. They were encircled by fire and flame, two beasts of immeasurable power, coming face to face.

“I don’t want to hurt you boy!” shouted Aelnoq over the roaring of the Earth. “There is no ounce of hatred in me that drives me to fight you. Yet, even then, I am bound to serve the Chancellor, until I am released. And now... he demands protection. From you. If you stand down, there’ll be nothing to fight over.”

“Do you think *I* want to do this!” Dark Curmo snarled. “It is hard to fathom, but there is nothing I can do to contain this anger. Just as you are bound, so am I.”

“Then beast, let’s have fun while we can!” Aelnoq shouted once more, a slow smile creeping on his face. He knew this was going to be more fun than he had had in a long time.

In that instant, in the blink of an eye, Dark Curmo shot out forward, lunging with all his might. He crushed the ground under him with each step in his run, pushing himself forward with increasing speed. He started decreasing the area between them exponentially.

Dark Curmo looked down at his hands as time seemed to slow down for a second. He couldn’t believe the state that he was in. Dark claws burst out of his fingers, five sharp knives down to the point.

In the next moment, he was upon the wizard and showed his claws right at his face. In the last second, Aelnoq summoned a blade that burned red and blocked the attack inches away from his face.

He was shocked that the creature had made it this far as it was. The creature's face was inches from his own, and his green hair ran wild. The creature grinned, and Aelnoq could see rows of sharp teeth in his mouth. The wind around them picked up, and the beginning of a tornado could be seen. The wood planks of the cabins were beginning to come off and even the lava started flowing up. It was a molten tornado.

The wall of destruction formed a wall around them, meaning no one could see in or out. The density of magic output was much higher than normal.

Dark Curmo jumped back. The old man was faster than he let on. But his own rage was driving him even further. With a quick glance he started running along the outer edge of the circle. Each footstep got him faster. Slowly, dark Curmo lowered himself to the ground and started running on all fours, getting even faster than before. He was a complete animal in this.

If there was anyone else besides Aelnoq in the situation, they would've been able to keep up with his movements, but Aelnoq could see every step, and when Dark Curmo once again lunged at him, Aelnoq parried it just in time, but this time, it was able to grasp a piece of his hair. Aelnoq stared at Curmo as he once again sprinting around the perimeter. He looked at him confused.

"Beast, what are you doing!" He screamed at the top of his lungs, just to get his voice heard. "I can feel your fury. Every inch of your soul wants nothing more than to eliminate me and go after Gylbard yourself. Your friend's head still rolls, so why do you do this?"

Dark Curmo laughed again, shaking his head. He broke from his sprint once more to attack the direct center of the circle. Aelnoq rolled out of the way this time, detecting that Curmo was moving a lot faster than before. So that was it.

“You’re beginning to catch on human!” Dark Curmo screeched. “The boy is the one supplying the anger. I, on the other hand, have intelligence of my own.” With each lunge, Curmo was slowly gaining speed. His movements were becoming more precise and all Aelnoq could do was defend himself. It was as if the curse knew he was no match for the wizard. Despite all of Curmo’s anger, this beast couldn’t allow them to die. It knew it’s only chance to beat Aelnoq was to slowly wear him down. It was a hunter on the prowl, trying to take down a creature ten times its size.

Aelnoq smiled. For the first time, he had dodged an attack. Not because it was powerful. No, but because this creature was channeling all his power into speed. In fact, he was channeling the air around them itself. The tornado around them spun faster and faster, which in turn helped Curmo regain his speed as he began his sprint.

This time, even Aelnoq himself was having trouble keeping up with where he was. *This was it*, Dark Curmo thought. With a sigh, he lunged one last time, with practically twice the speed he had before. His front arms extended like paws, ready to slash Aelnoq with all his might. In the air, lighting split the clouds and Aelnoq had his eyes closed. Dark Curmo’s smile widened. Everything was moving so slowly.

But, Aelnoq’s head whipped to look at Curmo, faster than he had ever moved before, and, in an instant, he held Curmo by the neck, raising him up in the air.

Aelnoq looked at him apologetically. Dark Curmo was flailing wildly, trying to scratch or harm the wizard in any way possible, but to no avail. It was true what they said. The power of a wizard was unparalleled to anything the world had ever seen. Dark Curmo had known this was going to happen.

“If you are to continue attempting to kill Gylbard, you will leave me no choice but to end your life where you now stand. Please, for your own sake. Back down.”

“You already heard me wizard,” said Dark Curmo. “I would want nothing more than to leave you and this village, but the boy binds me. His anger drives me even now. I am an unfeeling creature, but this boy’s rage is what orders me to kill.”

Aelnoq sighed, realizing what he would need to do. He could realize that this creature was a Purtur, but the only one who could call upon him now was a Purtur itself. The pure magic of those creatures was something not even the wizard could touch. As long as the boy was asleep, he would listen to no reason.

In that moment, they both heard a screech coming from above and an enormous beat landed behind the wizard, with its wings spread out. And it roared, a yell that would roll across the mountains and be heard by the faint ears of a farmer of Endridge.

Atop that beast was a large man with a growing beard, his eyes looking upon them with concern. “A purtur?” Aelnoq questioned to himself quietly. He could sense the same pure magic off of this man that came off of Curmo. The tornado around them kept up speed, to the point where Aelnoq couldn’t even tell if those outside had seen the man and beast land.

“You there!” Aelnoq shouted. “Atop the dragon. You know this boy?” Aelnoq questioned once more.

“If ye wish to spare ‘is life, I would request you give ‘im ta me. Name’s Malarkey!” said the man, jumping down from the dragon with a thunderous quake.

“I wish him no harm, yet I am bound to kill him if he continues this rampage.”

Malarkey smiled, making his way over to them. “Then I can fix this problem for both of us.” Slowly, he made his way over to Dark Curmo and graced the top of his head, to which the boy immediately fell asleep. He had touched Curmo’s magic, bringing him out from the curse. The color slowly returned to his face as Malarkey picked him up and made his way over to Zenvor.

The dragon excitedly yipped, wanting Curmo to hug her and tell her how big she’d gotten, but the boy didn’t say a word. “It’s alright girl,” Malarkey explained. “He’ll come to soon enough. What we needa do is get him and his pals outta here.”

“I shall release my magic barrier for an instant, Purtur. Grab the boy’s friends and flee. Your dragon there seems to be fully grown. She’s large enough to carry an army, so a few others should be no issue.” Malarkey nodded in response.

And, just as he had promised, Aelnoq let down the barrier. In that instant, Zenvor lunged towards Felix and a group of three others. The guards shouted at the sight and stepped back. Damia and Virago were too shocked to move.

Zenvor quickly picked them up before taking flight, flying due east. Everyone’s stomachs lunged as the air pressure quickly changed around them and they were surrounded by the clouds. Underneath, they could see Gylbard’s army taking aim to shoot them down, but they were already too far. No one had had any time to react. Once they were above the clouds, Zenvor slowly flapped her wings, maintaining the height they were at.

“Good girl!” Malarkey remarked, patting Zenvor on the neck. Looking back he stared at his misfit group of passengers. Damia, Virago, Felix, Sable, and Curmo all lay there.



“What... just... happened?” said Felix, daring to open his eyes. “MALARKEY IS THAT YOU!” he shouted.

Malarkey chuckled. “Yes boy, it's a surprise to see you here. After our encounter with that girl back at my tavern... wait isn't that you?” he stopped mid-sentence, staring at Virago.

“It's alright, she's apparently Curmo's sister,” Felix responded excitedly.

Malarkey stared between the two of them, dumbfounded. “I won't even ask,” he said.

“But, when I flew off with Zenvor here, she flew me right to Belveyon. For some reason she wouldn't leave this place, possibly looking for Curmo. When the army invaded, we hid in a barn she found. Tonight, I saw you all making your way over to the army camp and noticed Curmo in the crowd. And before I knew it, I was rushing in to get you all out.”

They all looked at him in amazement. If he hadn't arrived, who knows what would've happened to them.

“We are eternally in your gratitude,” said Damia with a slight bow, being as polite as one could atop a dragon.

In that moment, Curmo groaned as he tried to get up.

“Curmo!” Felix and Sable shouted in unison.

“Keep flying to....” he whispered, the others barely able to hear him.

“What did he say?” Virago asked

“Keep flying to Nero...” he said meekly.

“Nero?” Malarkey questioned.

“It's alright I'll explain on the way. We need to head there as soon as possible if we are to defeat Gylbard,” Felix explained.

Malarkey shrugged, “Then we’ll keep flying east.”

Curmo lightly laughed and gently patted Zenvor’s back. “That’s... my... girl.” To which Zenvor excitedly chirped, bobbing up and down. In an instant, Curmo fell asleep again, tired beyond bounds from what his body had gone through. Virago held him close, making sure he didn’t slip.

Sable groaned, “Ohhh I really don’t want to be up here. But I guess it’ll be a while.”

Despite what Sable said, each one of them knew they were lucky to be alive. They also knew one more thing. No matter what it took, no matter how long it took, they were going to get back, and take Gylbard down.

And now, the band of six were on their way to continue the adventure. And the first stop on that list... was the Great Bay of the Nero.

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