

My head swims and my heart burns when I think about it, so I've been trying not to. I know, though, that I must. Everyone sounded so hopeful, like it would be that easy to free Gideon from that wretched grip and bring him to our cause. I often wished so, in my travels; when we'd enter an inn, or turn a corner, I'd find myself half hoping and half dreading to see him standing there, hear his coarse voice again; but I know now that it can never happen.

I know Gideon, as well, I'd say as I know myself. So not a lot, but better than most others. I know how many years we spent together, when we'd shoot together, and run through the dappled woods or the streets of Cyre's quaint towns; I know how close we were, how dear a brother I was to him; and I know what bittered his heart as we grew. I know his resentment, I feel it searing at my soul each moment I think of him, and though the flames die when I draw my thoughts away, the ashes are still hot to the touch, and they whirl in a frenzy about my mind with everything else that's burnt down around me.

I remember seeing that gleam in his eyes the first time, hearing the scorn in his voice, and how we both played it off as a good-natured jab between family, though we both knew it wasn't. I see his features before me, warped with disgust as I cross his mind while he thinks I don't see him. Later, he cares not whether I witness.

Alariel told me she is to blame. I forgive her for her mistakes, for she has certainly earned her rank and place, and I know fully why she made her choice. I fear that it is as much my own fault as hers, however. I saw the cracks in our bonds, I saw the rift as it split, and I feigned ignorance, I pretended all was fair between he and I. I watched as the rift yawned into a chasm, and wrenched itself violently in the end, in the final day, when Gideon flew into such a spite-ridden flurry of hate and arrogance and wretchedness. If I had reached out to him, recognised the flaw in our relationship and sought to fix it, perhaps he'd be with me now. Perhaps this good family I have come to know would be stronger by one member, and better for it, for his quick mind and sharp aim were ever my envy.

But it cannot be. I have this dreaded shade on my heart, and I hear the ring of Alariel's words and I hear her wisdom. We might wrench the bow from his grasp and tear the corruption from his heart and mind, but when all the curse is lifted, we would be left with a man whose arrogance and scorn are like no other. We would find ourselves standing before a man who despises me with such fortitude, a man who believes so strongly that his destiny is the only one in the world, that he would watch the world burn to ashes around him, see the sky fall and the blood boil from our bodies, and still never admit that he strode the wrong path and chose the wrong ally. A man who could so easily have been me, should Alariel not have been so decisive in her judgement—to her, so unfeeling towards me, but to me, so wise.

I hold her no ill will, never could I dream it. She kept from me a secret that would have driven me to dreams of grandeur even I could scarcely imagine now, and in turn I kept from her my faith in that I also kept it from myself. Now, with her full vision restored to me, I understand that to have faith in myself, I must have faith in her, and to have faith in her I must have it in me. The family I have made would tell anyone how confident Valon Woodsrow is, how self-assured, but I'm not sure whether they quite see that it is a frail confidence, as thin as the shafts of the arrows I whittle or the cloak I wear. I have armour of glass forged in the haste of unwarranted aspiration, but I have begun to chip away at it from within, that I might instead bear the armour I have forged through trial and experience. Now is the time that I lay my arrogance to rest and reflect on my mistakes; there is one that glares above all the rest, one that I must atone for before I can truly take another step in Alariel's wake. Then, and only then, will I truly be fit to walk the righteous path that it seems so many think I have trodden for years.