

BALLAD OF THE ORC PALADIN

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Prologue

The Grand Museum of the United Kingdom of Valkra stood as a monument to the nation's storied past. Its marble halls stretched wide and tall, the light from towering windows casting golden rays onto the many treasures that filled the space—ancient artefacts, relics of war, and portraits of heroes long passed. One such painting, positioned at the heart of the gallery, drew the attention of visitors both young and old.

It was a magnificent portrait, larger than life, framed in gold and surrounded by intricate carvings of orcs, elves, dwarves, and humans—united in a circle, their hands joined in harmony. But the figure at the centre of it all was what made visitors pause. The man in the portrait wore the robes of a king, richly embroidered and adorned with symbols of unity and peace. A crown, gleaming with jewels, rested on his brow. His gaze was fierce but kind, his posture regal yet humble.

He was an orc.

"Is that really a king?" one of the children asked, his small voice echoing through the grand hall. A group of them had gathered at the base of the portrait, their young faces filled with awe and confusion as they stared up at the image. "But he's an orc! I thought orcs were only warriors."

Another child, a girl with wide eyes, tugged at her friend's sleeve. "They always said the kings of Valkra were human. How could an orc be the king?"

A soft chuckle interrupted their questions, and the children turned to see an old man standing nearby, his cane tapping gently against the polished floor. His face was wrinkled with age, but his eyes still gleamed with the wisdom of someone

who had lived through many tales. He smiled down at them, his voice warm and inviting.

“Ah,” he said, his tone soft but rich with the weight of history, “so you’ve noticed, have you? That, my young friends, is no ordinary king. That is Kaito, the First Orc King of Valkra—the one who united this land and brought peace after years of war.”

The children stared at him, wide-eyed, and one of them spoke up. “But how? How could an orc become king?”

The old man’s smile deepened, and he gestured for them to sit, lowering himself onto a nearby bench with a soft groan of effort. “It’s a story unlike any other,” he began, his voice carrying through the hall. “One of bravery, sacrifice, and the power of hope. Kaito didn’t come from a royal bloodline, nor did he seek the throne for power. In fact, he came from a faraway world—a world unlike ours.”

“A different world?” one of the boys asked, his curiosity piqued.

The old man nodded, his eyes twinkling with the joy of storytelling. “Yes, indeed. He wasn’t born in Valkra. He was just a boy from another world when he was brought here, and not as a king, but as an orc. In those days, orcs were feared and hated by many. But Kaito was different. He wasn’t born a warrior, you see. He didn’t fight for glory or power. He fought because he believed in something greater—because he wanted to protect the people who needed him.”

The children leaned forward, captivated by his words.

Well then children let me tell you a tale unlike any other.

1

The New Reality

The morning had started like any other for Kaito Nakamura. He sat quietly at the back of his high school classroom, trying to balance his boredom with the sleepiness that threatened to pull him under. The sound of the teacher's lecture droned on, a distant buzz in the background as his thoughts wandered. He doodled mindlessly in the corner of his notebook, imagining himself in the middle of an epic battle, sword in hand, facing a monstrous opponent. In his daydreams, he was always the hero—the one who could change everything. But real life had no such grandeur.

Kaito had always felt out of place in the mundane world around him. He wasn't particularly popular, nor did he excel at anything. He wasn't a top student or an athlete, and he wasn't someone people sought out. He was just... there. Another face in the sea of classmates. He dreamed of something different, something more- a life that had meaning and excitement.

It was during one of those very thoughts, his eyes glazed over in a half-awake state, that something happened. His vision blurred. The classroom around him seemed to waver, as if the air itself was rippling. Kaito blinked, shaking his head, but the sensation only intensified. The world twisted, a whirlpool of colour and sound, and then—darkness.

When Kaito opened his eyes, the first thing he felt was the ground beneath him. It was cold and hard, like stone. His body ached, his mind disoriented. He groaned, rolling over onto his back, his vision swimming as he tried to make sense of where he was. The sterile classroom was gone. Instead, he found himself staring at a sky so vast and blue it seemed unreal.

He shot up to his feet, heart racing. What happened? Where am I?

Looking around, he realised he was no longer in his familiar world. He was in the middle of what looked like a dense forest, the towering trees casting shadows that danced in the afternoon sun. The air smelled different—earthy, rich with the scent of pine and damp leaves. But something was off. His limbs felt heavy, his movements sluggish.

He looked down at his hands, and his breath caught in his throat. His skin wasn't his usual pale colour—it was a sickly shade of green. His fingers were thick, tipped with claw-like nails. He touched his face, finding a broad, flat nose and sharp tusks protruding from his mouth. Panic surged through him. This wasn't his body. This wasn't human.

He staggered back, his pulse quickening. A reflection in a nearby puddle confirmed the horrifying reality—he had become an orc. His face was monstrous, his body massive and hulking. What was happening? How did this even—

Before he could process any of it, a sharp pain exploded at the back of his head. He barely had time to react before his vision blurred again, and everything went black.

When Kaito came to, he was no longer alone. His hands were bound behind him with thick rope, and he was sitting upright against a cold stone wall. The first thing he noticed was the faint glow of a fire flickering in front of him, casting long shadows across the cave-like room. The second thing he noticed was the strange assortment of people surrounding him.

An elf with long silver hair stood a few feet away, leaning against the wall with a bow slung across her back, watching him with cold, calculating eyes. Beside her, a dwarf in heavy armour with a thick beard sat sharpening his axe, his muscles bulging with every movement. And finally, there was a human,

a young woman dressed in a deep-blue mage's robe, her staff glowing faintly in her hand.

Kaito's mouth felt dry as he tried to make sense of what was happening. His mind raced, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember anything after the moment he blacked out. He had no idea who these people were, or why they had him tied up.

The dwarf was the first to speak, his voice a deep rumble that echoed off the stone walls. "Well, looks like the orc finally woke up."

The elf's eyes narrowed. "You sure this one's not part of the raiding party? Could be a spy."

"I told you, he was just wandering out in the woods alone when we found him," the human mage said, her voice more curious than accusatory. "Doesn't seem like a soldier to me."

Kaito struggled against his bonds. "Wait! I don't know what's going on—where am I? Why am I tied up?"

The elf archer straightened, her eyes gleaming dangerously. "You expect us to believe that? An orc, lost and confused? Convenient story."

"I'm not... I'm not an orc!" Kaito protested, the words sounding foreign even to him now. He glanced down at his hulking green body again. "At least, I wasn't. I don't know what's happening, but I swear I'm not your enemy!"

The dwarf snorted. "You're a pretty strange-looking orc if that's the case. Haven't seen one dressed like you, that's for sure."

It was then that Kaito noticed his clothes—his school uniform was gone, replaced by ragged leather armour. His heart

pounded in his chest. This wasn't a dream. This was real. But how?

The human mage stepped closer, crouching down so that she was eye level with him. "What's your name, orc?"

"K-Kaito," he stammered. "My name is Kaito Nakamura. I'm not from here, I—"

The elf interrupted him, her bow in hand now, arrow notched and aimed directly at him. "Enough lies. Tell us who sent you, or I'll put this arrow through your skull right now."

Kaito's mind raced. He didn't know what to say, how to explain any of this. His entire life had flipped upside down in a matter of moments. Just a few hours ago, he'd been sitting in his classroom, bored and daydreaming. Now, he was tied up in a cave, surrounded by people who looked like they belonged in some fantasy RPG, while he was trapped in the body of an orc.

"I'm telling you the truth!" he shouted, his voice echoing off the stone walls. "I don't know how I got here! One minute, I was in my world, and the next, I was... like this."

The human mage's brow furrowed, and she exchanged a glance with the elf and the dwarf. "Another world?" she asked, her tone softening. "You mean... you're from a different realm?"

Kaito nodded frantically. "Yes! I'm not supposed to be here. I'm just a high school student—I don't know anything about this place."

The dwarf grunted. "Well, that's a new one. I've heard some wild excuses in my time, but this... this takes the cake."

The elf kept her bow trained on him, but the tension in her posture seemed to relax slightly. "If what you're saying is true, then why are you in the body of an orc?"

"I don't know!" Kaito shouted. "I don't know how any of this happened! I just want to go home!"

For a long moment, no one spoke. The only sound was the crackling of the fire. Then, the mage rose to her feet, turning to face her companions.

"I think we should take him to the Guild," she said. "If he's telling the truth, they'll want to hear about this. And if he's lying..." She let the thought hang in the air.

The dwarf scratched his beard. "Might be worth a shot. Better than killing him and asking questions later."

The elf sighed, lowering her bow but keeping the arrow notched. "Fine. But I'll be watching him closely. One wrong move, and he's dead."

Kaito let out a shaky breath, relief flooding his body. He didn't know what the Guild was, but it sounded better than being executed on the spot. At least for now, he had a chance to figure out what had happened to him—and maybe, just maybe, find a way back home.

As the adventurers prepared to move, Kaito's mind raced. He had so many questions, and even fewer answers. But one thing was clear: he was no longer in the world he knew. This was a land of magic and danger, and if he wanted to survive, he'd have to learn how to navigate it—and fast.

The journey through the forest was long and tense. Kaito walked ahead of the group, his hands still bound, the elf's sharp eyes trained on his every move. He tried to keep his head down, still coming to terms with his new body. His muscles were larger, heavier. His stride was different, his senses sharper. Even the smell of the forest seemed more intense now, the scent of damp earth and pine overwhelming his senses.

Despite the danger of his situation, a part of him couldn't help but marvel at it all. This world was nothing like the one he had left behind. The trees towered impossibly high, their leaves shimmering with a faint, magical glow. Birds he had never seen before flitted between the branches, and in the distance, he could hear the faint roar of some massive creature, far too large to be from Earth.

As night fell and they set up camp, Kaito found himself staring up at the stars. They were different here, unfamiliar constellations twinkling in the night sky. A pang of homesickness washed over him.

2

Dreams of Light

The cold night air nipped at Kaito's skin, though his orcish body felt less vulnerable to the chill than his human form ever had. He lay on his back, staring up at the unfamiliar stars, their faint light flickering against the deep expanse of the night sky. His mind raced, replaying the events of the last few hours. Everything still felt surreal—the forest, the adventurers, his own monstrous body. He kept hoping that any moment he'd wake up back in his high school desk, the weight of the orc's massive limbs and green skin nothing more than a dream.

But the stars above told a different story. This was real.

He glanced over at the campfire where the adventurers sat. They were keeping their distance, watching him like a caged beast, and who could blame them? In their eyes, he was still an orc, and that meant danger. Orcs weren't exactly known for kindness or diplomacy, at least not in any fantasy books Kaito had read. In most stories, they were savage brutes, raiders and warriors feared for their strength and ruthlessness.

But Kaito wasn't that. He wasn't a monster. He refused to be.

As the human mage—her name was Leira, Kaito had learned—sat watching the fire, Kaito shifted, trying to ignore the weight of the ropes binding his wrists. "Leira," he called out softly, careful not to startle the group.

She looked over, her eyes shadowed in the flickering firelight. "What is it, orc?"

Kaito flinched inwardly at the title, but he swallowed his pride. "You mentioned something earlier. About the Guild. What is it?"

Leira raised an eyebrow, glancing at the elf—whose name was Ilyana—and the dwarf, Rogar, before turning her attention back to Kaito. “The Adventurer’s Guild. It’s the governing body that controls most adventuring activities across the continent. They set bounties, manage quests, and keep order between different factions. Why do you ask?”

Kaito hesitated, his heart pounding as he voiced the question that had been swirling in his mind since he first saw his reflection. “Is there... is there a way to prove to them that I’m not like other orcs? That I’m not evil?”

Leira frowned, clearly confused. “Prove? What are you talking about?”

“I want to be a paladin,” Kaito said, surprising even himself with the boldness of his words. “I want to show everyone that I’m not some monster, that I’m... I’m different. I want to become a paladin of light.”

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Then, Rogar let out a booming laugh. “A paladin? You, an orc? Oh, that’s rich! Paladins are defenders of justice, light, and honor. Not something an orc can just sign up for.”

Kaito clenched his jaw, but kept his voice calm. “I’m serious. I might look like an orc, but that doesn’t mean I can’t fight for good.”

Ilyana, the elf, scoffed. “And what makes you think the gods will even hear your prayers, orc? The divine choose paladins based on their purity of heart and unwavering dedication. You would have to convince not just us, but the very heavens themselves.”

Kaito felt a fire ignite inside him, hotter than any he had ever felt before. “I don’t care how hard it is. I’ll do whatever it takes

to prove myself. I'll show the gods, the Guild, and everyone else that I'm worthy."

Leira studied him for a moment, her sharp eyes narrowed in thought. "Why a paladin? Why not a warrior or a mage? Why choose a path that demands purity and righteousness?"

Kaito paused, the firelight dancing across his face as he thought about her question. "Because I want to be a symbol of what I know I am inside," he said quietly. "I want people to look at me and know that I'm not evil just because of how I look. I want to protect people, to fight for something bigger than myself."

For a moment, Leira didn't respond. Then, to Kaito's surprise, she stood up and walked over to him. She waved her staff, and the ropes binding his hands fell loose with a soft snap. He flexed his wrists, the skin red and raw from the tight bindings.

"Very well, Kaito Nakamura," she said, her tone softer than before. "If you're truly serious about becoming a paladin, the Guild will be the place to start. You'll need training, guidance, and—most of all—you'll need to find a god willing to bestow their blessing upon you. It won't be easy, and many will doubt you, but I'll give you a chance."

Rogar grunted. "He'll need more than luck. He'll need a miracle."

Kaito nodded, gratitude swelling in his chest. "Thank you. I won't waste this chance."

The next morning, the group set out again, Kaito walking freely now. His bonds had been removed, though the elf Ilyana still kept a wary distance, her bow never far from reach. They travelled through the dense forest, the trees thinning as the sun rose higher into the sky.

As they walked, Kaito tried to piece together what little he knew about this world. Leira had mentioned that orcs were part of a larger raiding party, constantly warring with the surrounding human and elven kingdoms. The continent they were on was called Galharn, a vast land of warring nations, ancient ruins, and powerful magic. The Guild served as the neutral ground for adventurers of all races and backgrounds, and it acted as a stabilising force against the chaos that plagued the world.

The world of Galharn was dangerous—monsters roamed the wilds, ancient artefacts of immense power were scattered throughout forgotten ruins, and warring kingdoms constantly vied for dominance. But there was more, something deeper, hidden beneath the surface. Kaito could feel it.

As they approached the edge of the forest, a sprawling city came into view. Tall stone walls surrounded it, and from within, Kaito could make out the tops of towers and rooftops. This was Eldrath, one of the largest cities on the continent and home to the Guild's central headquarters.

The gates were bustling with activity as merchants, adventurers, and townsfolk moved in and out of the city. Kaito's heart raced. This was it—his first real step in proving himself. As they approached the gate, however, the guards stationed there immediately stiffened, their eyes locking onto Kaito.

One guard, a tall man with a thick moustache, stepped forward, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "Halt! Orcs aren't allowed within the city walls."

Rogar stepped forward, his thick arm extending protectively in front of Kaito. "He's with us. And he's no raider. We vouch for him."

The guard's eyes narrowed. "Vouch or no, he's still an orc. We've had raiding parties nearby—how do we know this isn't some trick?"

Kaito felt the weight of their stares, the mistrust hanging heavy in the air. He took a deep breath, stepping forward before Rogar could speak. "I'm not here to cause trouble. I'm here to join the Adventurer's Guild and prove that I'm not like the others."

The guard looked sceptical, but Leira stepped up beside him, her voice calm and commanding. "Let us through. He's under our watch, and we're taking him to the Guild. If there's any trouble, it'll be on our heads."

The guard hesitated for a moment longer before sighing and stepping aside. "Fine. But if he so much as breathes wrong, he's out."

Kaito exhaled in relief as they passed through the gates. The city of Eldrath unfolded before him, bustling with life. Stone buildings lined the streets, and vendors called out to passersby from their stalls. He could see adventurers everywhere—some in heavy armour, others in robes or light leathers—moving in and out of shops and taverns.

But what caught his attention most was the towering structure at the heart of the city: the Guild Hall.

The massive stone building loomed over the surrounding buildings, its arched entrance flanked by banners bearing the Guild's insignia—a sword crossed with a staff, symbolising unity between warriors and mages. This was where his journey would truly begin.

Leira led the group toward the hall, her expression unreadable. "This is it, Kaito. If you're serious about becoming a paladin, this is where you'll find your path. But be warned—many will doubt you. Orcs have a long history of

violence and cruelty. It's not just about training or strength. It's about showing the world that you can rise above what you were born into."

Kaito nodded, determination hardening in his chest. "I'll prove them wrong. I'll prove that anyone, even an orc, can become a force for good."

As they entered the Guild Hall, the air was thick with anticipation. The path ahead was daunting, filled with challenges and trials. But Kaito knew one thing for certain:

He would become a paladin, no matter what it took. And perhaps, in the process, he would uncover the true reason why he had been brought to this world.

3

The Weight of Destiny

The Guild Hall was even more imposing up close. As Kaito stepped through the massive stone archway, he couldn't help but feel dwarfed by the towering ceilings, the grand columns etched with ancient runes, and the endless hum of activity around him. Adventurers of all shapes and sizes filled the hall—humans, elves, dwarves, and even some more exotic races that Kaito had only ever seen in fantasy art. They gathered around quest boards, haggled with merchants, and boasted about their latest conquests.

It was a living, breathing hub of excitement. But beneath the awe, Kaito felt the stares. Wherever he went, people's eyes followed him, narrowing with suspicion, distrust, or outright hostility. His orcish appearance drew attention, and not the good kind. His tusks, green skin, and hulking form were reminders of the wars between orcs and humans that plagued this land.

Rogar, Leira, and Ilyana led the way through the crowd, drawing curious glances. Orcs in the Guild Hall were a rare sight, and Kaito could practically feel the tension mounting with every step he took.

"Stay close," Leira whispered, her voice low. "Orcs have a reputation, and not the kind that opens doors."

"I noticed," Kaito muttered, trying to keep his shoulders hunched to make himself seem smaller—no easy task given the sheer size of his new body.

They reached a grand staircase that spiralled upward, leading toward a series of rooms above. At the top, a wide wooden door stood open, a large golden emblem of the Guild

etched into its surface. Leira motioned for Kaito to follow as they ascended, the noise of the hall gradually fading behind them.

When they entered the room, Kaito was greeted by a sight he hadn't expected—a council of sorts. Five people sat behind a long wooden table, each one garbed in ornate robes or armour that denoted their high rank. There was a balding man in gleaming silver armour, a bearded dwarf in ceremonial garb, and an elderly woman whose fingers crackled with faint arcs of magic. In the centre sat a figure that drew Kaito's attention most—a stern-looking man with a long, dark cloak embroidered with silver threads. His presence dominated the room.

Leira stepped forward, bowing slightly. "We seek an audience with the Guild Council on behalf of this... aspirant."

The dark-cloaked figure raised an eyebrow, his eyes locking onto Kaito with unsettling intensity. "An orc?" His voice was cold, flat. "What business does an orc have with the Adventurer's Guild?"

Kaito swallowed hard but stood his ground. "I'm not like the others. I came here to become a paladin."

For a moment, the room was silent. Then, the armoured man chuckled, his laughter sharp and dismissive. "A paladin? Orcs don't have the heart or the will for such things. What makes you think you could ever—"

"Enough, Valmir," the elderly mage cut in, her voice surprisingly calm. She turned her sharp gaze toward Kaito. "There's more to this than we see. This is no ordinary orc. The aura surrounding him... it's not of this world."

Kaito blinked in surprise. "What do you mean?"

The mage stood, her frail form moving with a surprising grace as she approached. "There's something unusual about you, boy. I can sense it. You're not just an orc. There's a magic about you, something beyond the borders of this realm. Tell me—where do you come from?"

Kaito hesitated, wondering how much of the truth to reveal. But he had already decided to be honest, no matter how strange it might sound. "I'm not from this world. I was... teleported here. I don't know how or why, but one moment I was in my world, and the next, I woke up in this body. I'm human—on the inside."

The room fell silent again, but this time the tension was different. There was curiosity, and perhaps even something close to disbelief. Leira remained quiet, her face impassive, but the rest of the council exchanged glances, as though weighing his words.

The dark-cloaked figure—whom Kaito guessed to be the leader of the council—leaned forward. "This world is not kind to orcs, whether they are born here or not. Even if you come from another realm, you'll be judged by the body you wear, not the soul inside it."

"I know," Kaito replied, his voice steady. "That's why I want to become a paladin. I need to prove that I'm not a monster, that I can fight for the same justice and light as anyone else."

The armoured man, Valmir, shook his head. "It's impossible. The gods would never grant their blessing to an orc. The power of a paladin comes from divine favour, and no deity would choose an orcish vessel."

The elderly mage, however, seemed to consider Kaito's words carefully. "Perhaps not, but there are exceptions. And if he truly comes from another world, there may be more at play here than simple divine favour." She turned to the leader. "It might be worth exploring."

The leader stroked his chin, his eyes never leaving Kaito. "It's a gamble. But in these times... perhaps it's a gamble worth taking."

Kaito frowned. "What do you mean?"

The leader sat back, his face hardening. "The world is changing, boy. A darkness stirs in the east, in the forsaken lands of Valkra. Our scouts speak of strange movements, unnatural creatures gathering under a new banner. If war comes, it will not just be orcs we face, but something much darker."

He paused, his gaze narrowing. "The gods have been quiet for too long, and some say their silence is a warning. If what you say is true—that you come from another world—then perhaps there's a reason for it. A larger purpose."

Leira stepped forward, her voice low. "I've seen the eastern skies darken myself. Something is coming, something far worse than any orc raiding party. We can't afford to ignore that."

The elderly mage nodded in agreement. "If the gods have brought you here, it may be a sign. Perhaps this boy is more than he seems."

Kaito's mind raced. The idea of a larger purpose, of some dark force rising in the east—it all sounded like something out of a game, but this was real. He felt the weight of their words settling on his shoulders. This wasn't just about proving himself as a paladin. This was about a threat to the entire world.

The leader finally stood, his dark cloak sweeping behind him. "Very well. If you wish to prove yourself, you'll have your chance. There is an ancient temple to the north, long abandoned, but it is said to still hold the blessings of the old

gods. If you can make the pilgrimage there and return with proof of the gods' favour, we will consider your request."

Kaito's heart leapt. "I'll do it."

Valmir snorted. "He'll be dead before he reaches the temple's gates. That place is cursed—no one has returned from it in years."

The leader gave Kaito a piercing look. "It will not be an easy journey, and you'll be going alone. The temple lies beyond dangerous lands, where beasts and bandits roam. But if you succeed, your claim will be heard, and perhaps the gods will see fit to grant you their blessing."

Kaito felt the weight of the task settle on him. He had never been on a quest like this—his experience with danger had been limited to video games and novels. But now, in this world of swords and magic, the stakes were real. If he failed, it could mean more than just his own death. It could mean the rise of a darkness that would consume the world.

He glanced at Leira, Rogar, and Ilyana, who had remained silent during the council's deliberation. They weren't coming with him. This would be his trial alone.

"I'll do it," Kaito said, more determined than ever. "I'll make the pilgrimage and return with proof."

The leader gave a nod, his expression unreadable. "Then may the gods watch over you, Kaito Nakamura."

As Kaito left the chamber, the weight of his mission pressed down on him. He was stepping into the unknown, not just in this new world, but into something far greater than he had ever imagined.

And somewhere, far to the east, the darkness stirred.

4

Into the Northern Wilds

The morning air was crisp as Kaito stepped out of the Guild Hall, a cold wind blowing in from the north. The weight of the task before him felt heavier now that it had been made real. The northern temple lay far beyond the safety of Eldrath, deep in the untamed wilderness. He had no map, no allies, and no experience with a journey like this.

But he had no choice. If Kaito wanted to become a paladin and prove that he was not just an orc, but something more, this was the only path.

Leira had given him a few supplies—enough rations for a week, a dagger, and a small charm of protection she claimed might shield him from lesser dangers. “It’s not much,” she had said before he left, “but you’ll need every advantage you can get.”

Now, as he stood at the gates of Eldrath, his breath fogging in the cold morning light, Kaito couldn’t help but glance back at the city’s towering walls. Beyond them, he could still see the smoke rising from the morning cooking fires, hear the distant clamour of merchants setting up shop. A part of him longed to stay behind, to disappear into the crowds and leave this dangerous quest to someone else.

But no. He couldn’t give up. Not now.

Kaito adjusted the strap of the rough leather pack on his shoulder and turned toward the wilderness. The northern wilds stretched out before him, a land of dense forests, jagged mountains, and hidden dangers. Somewhere far beyond those mountains was the ancient temple, and if he was to reach it, he would need to navigate not only the wilderness

but the political landscape of a world teetering on the edge of chaos.

Galharn, as Kaito had come to understand, was a land divided by centuries of conflict, alliances, and mistrust between its many races and kingdoms. Leira had explained some of it on their journey to Eldrath, though the details were overwhelming.

In the west, the human kingdoms dominated vast plains and fertile lands. The most powerful of these was Tavalon, the capital of human civilization, a city known for its grand architecture and religious institutions. The humans of Tavalon were devout followers of the Sun God, and paladins from this region were known for their rigid sense of justice and uncompromising faith. However, Tavalon was not without its enemies.

To the east, where Kaito's destination lay, the lands grew wilder and more dangerous. Orcish raiding parties had long plagued the borderlands between the human kingdoms and the desolate lands of Valkra, a lawless region ruled by warlords and mercenaries. Once a proud kingdom, Valkra had fallen into ruin centuries ago, its capital now a shadow of its former glory. It was from these forsaken lands that the rumours of darkness rising had begun, and it was this shadow that was spreading across Galharn.

Further south, beyond the vast Emerald Sea, lay the Elven Kingdoms, lands of ancient magic and strict hierarchy. The elves had once ruled the forests and rivers with unmatched grace and wisdom, but in recent years, political factions had torn their unity apart. The High Elves of the capital, Cynelora, were embroiled in a power struggle with the Wood Elves of the southern forests. The elves had grown suspicious of outsiders, and though they had once been staunch allies of the human kingdoms, relations had soured in recent decades.

In the northern mountains, the Dwarven Holds were scattered like gems in the stone. Though dwarves were fierce warriors and cunning merchants, their kingdoms were insular, their wealth kept secret beneath the mountain halls. They traded with both humans and elves, but they trusted neither.

And then, there were the orcs.

Kaito had learned that the orcish clans were divided, some serving warlords in Valkra, others roaming as mercenaries for hire. Though once considered savages, orcs had evolved over the centuries, forming complex hierarchies and alliances. Yet their brutal reputation remained, and the orcs were often used as pawns in the political games of the more powerful kingdoms. No one trusted them, and most still viewed them as raiders, slavers, and warmongers.

As Kaito began his journey into the wilds, he realised just how precarious the situation in Galharn had become. There were cracks everywhere—in the alliances, in the kingdoms, and even between races. And somewhere in those cracks, something far darker was stirring.

The first few days of travel were harsh but manageable. The path leading north out of Eldrath was well-trodden by traders and adventurers, though it grew less distinct the farther Kaito ventured from the city. He passed through thick forests, their trees towering high above him, casting long shadows over the narrow path. Occasionally, he'd come across other travellers—merchants hauling carts of goods or small adventuring parties looking for fortune in the wilds. Each time, Kaito kept his head low and avoided interaction. The last thing he needed was to draw attention to himself as an orc.

By the third day, the weather had begun to turn. Dark clouds rolled in from the east, bringing with them a cold rain that soaked through his clothes and made the trail slick with mud. Kaito pulled his cloak tighter around himself, trying to shield his body from the biting wind. He had grown used to his new

orcish form in some ways—the strength in his limbs, the durability of his muscles—but there were still times he longed for the simplicity of his human body. Being an orc came with its advantages, but the distrust it invited was constant, like a shadow that followed him everywhere.

The forest grew denser as he ventured deeper into the wilds, and soon the signs of civilization disappeared altogether. Kaito relied on the instructions Leira had given him before he left: head north, follow the Silver River, and look for the mountains that marked the temple's location.

But he wasn't alone in the wilds.

On the fourth day, as he trekked through a narrow ravine, Kaito heard something that made him freeze—voices. They were faint, carried by the wind, but unmistakable. His heart raced as he crouched low, slipping behind a cluster of rocks. He peered over the edge, scanning the ravine for the source of the sound.

There, further up the path, was a group of figures. At first glance, they looked like ordinary travellers—four of them, two humans, an elf, and a dwarf. But something about them seemed off. Their movements were too calculated, their weapons too polished for mere wanderers.

Kaito's suspicion grew as he crept closer, his eyes narrowing as he overheard their conversation.

"...we cross into Tavalon by nightfall," the elf was saying, her voice low and sharp. "The supplies should be enough to last until we reach Valkra."

"We'd better hurry," the dwarf grumbled. "The eastern lands are getting more dangerous by the day. Last thing we need is to run into one of those warbands."

Kaito's blood ran cold. They were headed for Valkra—one of the forsaken lands, the very place the Guild leader had warned about. And if they were heading there with supplies, it could only mean one thing—they were part of the growing darkness, smuggling resources into enemy hands.

His mind raced. He was outnumbered, unarmed except for the dagger Leira had given him. And if they saw him, they'd kill him on the spot. He was an orc, after all. But he couldn't let them go. If they were part of the threat rising in Valkra, their mission needed to be stopped.

As Kaito debated his next move, he heard the crunch of footsteps behind him. His heart lurched, and before he could react, something hard struck him across the back of his head. He collapsed into the mud, his vision blurring as he heard voices shout above him.

"Well, well," a rough voice growled. "Looks like we've found ourselves a spy."

Kaito blinked up through the haze of pain to see a towering orc standing above him, his face twisted in a cruel grin. His companions—the group Kaito had been watching—stood beside him, their weapons drawn.

"Orcs don't usually sneak around like this," the elf said, her voice laced with suspicion. "Who sent you?"

Kaito tried to speak, but his head was spinning, the world tilting sideways. He felt the rough hands of the orc yank him to his feet, his vision swimming as they dragged him toward the group. He had no way out, no chance of escape.

But as darkness closed in around him, Kaito knew one thing for certain: the road to the temple—and his destiny as a paladin—would not be a simple one. There were forces at work far greater than he had realised, and somehow, he had become tangled in the very heart of it.

The political machinations of nations, the rising tensions between races, and the shadow spreading from Valkra—they were all connected. And Kaito, whether he liked it or not, had become a player in this dangerous game.

5

A Game of Shadows

Kaito's head throbbed, his body aching as he slowly regained consciousness. His hands were bound again, but this time by thick iron chains that cut into his wrists. The cold stone floor beneath him felt unforgiving, and the distant murmur of voices echoed through the cave. The smell of damp earth mixed with smoke filled the air, adding to the suffocating atmosphere.

Kaito forced his eyes open. He was in a cave, dimly lit by torches that flickered against the jagged stone walls. His captors were gathered around a table nearby, hunched over a map, speaking in low, hushed tones. He strained to make out their words, but his focus kept slipping back to the heavy chains that held him in place.

A new sense of unease settled in his gut. These people weren't just a group of random mercenaries. They were part of something larger. Something dangerous.

Grushak, the orc leader, was closest to him, sharpening his massive axe. His hulking form looked even more menacing in the low light, his yellow eyes occasionally flicking toward Kaito as though assessing whether he was still a threat. The elf, Sylvara, stood by the entrance of the cave, her keen eyes ever watchful. The dwarf, Borin, sat sharpening his hammer's head on a whetstone, his grumbling voice barely audible over the scrape of metal. Nerik and Mara, the two human mercenaries, were deep in conversation, their voices too low to overhear, but Kaito caught enough to sense the tension between them.

The fact that they hadn't killed him immediately was both a relief and a warning. They hadn't figured out what to do with him yet, and that made him nervous. He shifted his hands

subtly, testing the chains, but they held firm. His mind raced—he needed a way out before they decided his fate for him.

Grushak noticed his movements and approached, looming over Kaito with a grim expression. “Still thinkin’ of escaping?” His voice was a growl, but there was something almost amused in his tone. “You’ll have better luck talkin’ your way out.”

Kaito met his gaze, swallowing the rising panic. “I wasn’t trying to escape.”

Grushak snorted. “Then what? Waitin’ to be executed?”

“I’m not your enemy,” Kaito said, his voice firmer than he expected. “I’ve been on my own. I didn’t come here to fight anyone.”

“On your own, huh?” Sylvara’s cold voice cut in as she stepped closer, eyeing Kaito with distrust. “An orc wandering alone in the wilds? Either you’re a fool, or you’re lying.”

“I’m neither,” Kaito replied, locking eyes with her. “I’m looking for something. Something that’s bigger than just survival.”

The group went quiet, and Grushak’s expression darkened. “And what would that be?”

Kaito took a deep breath. This was it—his chance to turn the tables. “The temple. The one in the north. I need to reach it. I’m not here to spy on you or cause trouble. I just need to get there.”

The room was silent for a moment, then Borin let out a rough laugh. “A temple? You’re after a fool’s errand, boy. That place is cursed.”

"It's more than a temple," Kaito pressed on, his desperation growing. "There's something there. Something that can prove I'm not just an orc."

Grushak stared at him for a long moment, his eyes narrowing. "You're after the gods' favour, aren't you? Tryin' to make yourself more than what you are?"

Kaito nodded slowly. "Yes. I need to become a paladin."

Borin snorted. "Paladins? You're dreamin', lad. No god's ever gonna bless an orc."

But Kaito didn't back down. "Maybe not, but I have to try. I'm not like other orcs."

"You sure about that?" Grushak muttered, his voice low and dark. "The world don't care what you think you are. Orcs are orcs. That's how it's always been."

Sylvara's cold eyes remained fixed on Kaito. "Even if you're telling the truth, that temple's been untouched for years. It's in hostile territory, and no one who's gone there has come back."

"I know it's dangerous," Kaito said, his voice steady. "But if I don't try, I'll never be anything more than this."

For a long moment, the group exchanged glances, weighing Kaito's words. Grushak crossed his arms, his expression hardening. "Let him go to the temple then. If the gods favour him, we'll know soon enough. If not, he'll die on his way there. Either way, we don't lose anything."

Sylvara didn't look convinced, but she didn't argue. "Fine," she said coldly. "But if he makes one wrong move, we kill him."

Kaito swallowed, knowing how thin the ice beneath him was. "I won't cause you any trouble."

Grushak grunted and turned back to his weapon. "You'll leave with us in the morning. We're headed toward the same cursed place, and if you're still alive by the time we part ways, maybe you'll find your gods."

The morning brought cold winds and the promise of a difficult journey. The group set out at dawn, the sky a dull grey overhead. The forests grew sparser as they travelled north, the landscape changing into jagged hills and rocky cliffs. Every step brought them closer to the temple—and to Valkra, the land where the warlords had been gathering their forces.

Kaito's mind raced as they travelled. He couldn't help but wonder why they were headed toward the same place. Something about the group didn't add up. Grushak's warband had been destroyed, and yet here he was, travelling with a dwarf, an elf, and two human mercenaries, all seemingly with a common goal. What had brought them together? And what was their interest in the north?

As they walked, Kaito kept his distance, his eyes always scanning the horizon for threats. The journey had a different weight to it now. He wasn't just trying to survive—he was walking into something much larger than himself. The temple wasn't just a symbol of hope for his own transformation. It was a crossroads, a place where ancient forces converged.

Grushak's earlier words echoed in his mind: The world doesn't care what you think you are.

The thought lingered, heavy and uncomfortable. Could he really change his fate? Or was he doomed to be seen as a monster, no matter what he did? He had to find out. He had to see for himself what awaited him at the temple, even if it meant risking everything.

By the third day, the weather grew harsher. Dark clouds rolled in, casting shadows across the barren landscape. The wind

picked up, biting at their skin, and the path became more treacherous. The tension in the group grew as they drew closer to Valkra's borders.

It was on that evening, as they set up camp near the mouth of a narrow ravine, that Kaito's suspicions deepened. He had overheard Nerik and Mara speaking in low tones earlier, their words laced with urgency. Though he couldn't make out everything, he had caught enough to know that they weren't just here for the temple.

They were here to make contact with someone. Someone in Valkra.

After the others had gone to rest, Kaito waited by the fire, his mind churning with questions. What were they planning? He needed answers, and he wasn't going to get them by sitting quietly on the sidelines.

As the firelight flickered, Grushak approached, sitting down beside him with a grunt. "You've got a look in your eyes," the orc said, his voice low. "Somethin' on your mind?"

Kaito glanced at him, choosing his words carefully. "Why are you going to Valkra?"

Grushak didn't answer right away. He stared into the flames for a long moment before speaking. "The warlords are gathering. The humans and elves are blind to it, but something big's coming. Bigger than any one army or kingdom. We're headin' there to get ahead of it. If we don't... well, no one survives what's comin'."

Kaito frowned, his unease growing. "What is coming?"

Grushak's expression darkened. "An old power. Dark magic, the kind that's been buried for centuries. It's rising again. The warlords are after it, and if they get it, it won't just be orcs that suffer. The whole world'll burn."

A cold knot formed in Kaito's stomach. Dark magic. An old power. It all sounded like the very thing the Guild had warned him about.

Grushak's eyes flicked to Kaito's, and his voice dropped even lower. "You think becomin' a paladin will save you from that? Maybe. Or maybe you'll be swallowed up in it like the rest of us."

Kaito didn't know what to say. The weight of his quest felt heavier than ever.

Grushak rose, his axe slung over his shoulder. "Rest while you can, boy. Tomorrow we cross into Valkra, and from there, nothin' will be the same."

As Grushak walked away, Kaito stared into the dying fire, his thoughts spinning.

6

Into Valkra

The morning sun was a pale disk barely visible through the thick fog that clung to the landscape. The air was cold and damp, and as Kaito adjusted the pack on his shoulders, he could feel the tension radiating from the group. They were close now—close to the forsaken lands of Valkra, where few dared to tread. The dark territory lay beyond the jagged cliffs and treacherous ravines they had been navigating for days. Valkra was more than just dangerous terrain; it was a land where shadows had teeth, and the dark power Grushak had spoken of began to make itself known.

As they packed up the camp, Kaito could feel the weight of Grushak's words from the night before. He had always known that something more sinister lay beyond the political struggles between the kingdoms and races of Galharn. The Guild leader's warning about a rising darkness was no longer a vague threat—it was becoming reality. And Valkra was at the heart of it.

The group set off without much conversation. Grushak led the way, his massive frame moving with surprising agility as they navigated the increasingly steep and rocky terrain. Sylvara was not far behind, her elven eyes sharp as she scanned the surroundings for any sign of movement. Kaito, who had been watching her closely over the last few days, knew she was more than just cautious. She was anticipating something—something that might attack from the shadows.

The narrow ravine they followed soon gave way to a plateau, and from their elevated position, Kaito could see the edges of Valkra in the distance. Dark clouds swirled above the distant mountains, and the land between them was barren and

scorched, the remnants of old battles etched into the landscape. Crumbling watchtowers and half-buried fortresses jutted from the earth like the bones of a fallen giant, a stark reminder of the chaos that had once consumed these lands.

"This is where it begins," Grushak muttered as they paused at the edge of the plateau, gazing out over the land. "Once we cross into Valkra, we'll be on our own. No patrols, no laws, no safe harbours."

Kaito nodded but said nothing. The reality of their journey was sinking in. Valkra wasn't just dangerous—it was a land abandoned by the gods, where dark forces reigned and where even the most seasoned warriors met their end. He thought again of the temple, hidden somewhere within this cursed territory. It was the key to his transformation, the only way to prove to himself and others that he wasn't just an orc. But it felt farther away than ever, a flickering hope on the edge of a growing nightmare.

"Move quickly and stay alert," Sylvara added, her voice tight. "There are creatures here that are not natural. Beasts twisted by old magic. We're not the only ones hunting in these lands."

Her words sent a chill through Kaito, but he pushed the fear down. He had to stay focused. One step at a time. The temple was waiting.

As they descended into Valkra, the landscape grew more hostile. The air itself seemed heavier, almost suffocating, as if the very ground was tainted by the darkness that had consumed the land. Strange sounds echoed from the mountains—unearthly howls, distant roars, and the occasional crackle of something that felt like magic.

The group moved in silence, every step measured and deliberate. Grushak's axe never left his hand, his eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of danger. Sylvara's bow

was at the ready, an arrow notched and poised to strike at a moment's notice. Even Borin, who usually grumbled and muttered under his breath, was silent, his war hammer gleaming in the pale light.

Kaito could feel the weight of his dagger at his side, but it felt inadequate compared to the threats lurking in this land. He kept his focus sharp, his senses heightened, but his mind continued to drift to the temple, and what awaited him there. Would the gods truly grant their blessing to an orc? Could he find redemption in a place like this?

Nerik and Mara, the human mercenaries, brought up the rear, whispering in hushed tones. Kaito had caught enough of their conversations to know that they had other business in Valkra. They weren't here for the temple; they were here for something—someone—else. Kaito wasn't sure what, but whatever it was, it tied into the rising darkness that Grushak had warned him about.

As they pressed on, the group reached the outskirts of a ruined fortress. The structure was massive, with crumbling stone walls and a half-collapsed tower that loomed over the surrounding landscape like a sentinel from another age. The fortress was long abandoned, but the air around it felt thick with magic—old, twisted magic that made Kaito's skin crawl.

"We should move around it," Sylvara suggested, her eyes narrowing as she surveyed the ruins. "There's something off about this place."

Grushak hesitated, his hand tightening on the hilt of his axe. "Agreed. No need to go looking for trouble. But we should be careful. This area is crawling with bandits and worse."

Just as the group began to skirt the fortress, a low growl echoed through the air. Kaito froze. The growl wasn't from any creature he had ever heard. It was deep, almost guttural, and it sent a shiver through him.

“Ready yourselves,” Grushak barked, his eyes scanning the shadows. “We’re not alone.”

The growl came again, louder this time, and from the darkened entrance of the ruined fortress, something emerged. It moved like a shadow at first—an indistinct blur against the stone walls. But as it stepped into the faint light, Kaito’s breath caught in his throat.

The creature was unlike anything he had ever seen. It was humanoid, but twisted and deformed, with long, sinewy limbs and skin as black as night. Its eyes glowed with a sickly green light, and dark tendrils of magic pulsed around its body like a shroud. Its movements were unnatural, jerky, as if it were being controlled by some malevolent force.

“What in the gods’ name is that?” Borin growled, raising his hammer.

Sylvara didn’t wait for an answer. She fired an arrow, her aim true, and it flew straight toward the creature’s chest. The arrow struck, sinking deep into the creature’s flesh. But instead of staggering or falling, the creature barely reacted. It reached up, almost lazily, and yanked the arrow free, dark blood oozing from the wound but healing over in seconds.

Kaito’s heart pounded as the creature advanced, its eyes locked on them with a malevolent hunger. Grushak charged forward with a roar, his axe swinging down in a powerful arc, but the creature moved with unnatural speed, sidestepping the blow and lashing out with one of its long, clawed hands. Grushak was thrown back, crashing into the ground with a heavy thud.

The rest of the group sprang into action. Borin charged, his hammer glowing with a faint magical light as he swung at the creature’s legs, but it dodged again, moving with an eerie, fluid grace. Sylvara loosed another arrow, this time aiming for

its head, but the creature simply deflected it with a swipe of its arm, as though batting away a fly.

Kaito gripped his dagger, his mind racing. He had no experience fighting something like this—no training, no strategy. But he couldn't just stand there. He had to act.

As the creature focused its attention on Borin, Kaito darted forward, aiming for its exposed back. He drove his dagger into its side, putting all his strength into the blow. The blade sank deep, and for a moment, Kaito thought he had struck true.

But the creature turned its head toward him, its glowing green eyes locking onto his with an almost mocking expression. It hissed, and Kaito felt a wave of dark energy slam into him, throwing him back. He hit the ground hard, the air knocked from his lungs.

The creature advanced on him, its clawed hands outstretched, dark magic pulsing around them. Kaito scrambled to his feet, panic surging through him. He wasn't strong enough. He wasn't trained for this. But as the creature loomed over him, ready to strike, something deep inside him stirred.

A flash of light—faint, but undeniable—flickered in Kaito's vision. It came from within him, a warmth that pushed back against the darkness. His mind flashed to the temple, to the blessing he sought. Was this it? Was this the power that could turn the tide?

The creature lunged, and Kaito raised his dagger instinctively. But as he did, the blade glowed with the same faint light, as though responding to something within him. The creature hesitated for the briefest of moments, its glowing eyes narrowing.

And then, with a roar, Grushak slammed his axe into the creature's side, driving it back. Sylvara followed up with another arrow, this one finding its mark in the creature's throat. It staggered, dark magic crackling around it as it let out a piercing, inhuman scream. For a moment, it seemed like the darkness itself recoiled, retreating from the creature as it collapsed in on itself, the dark magic dissipating into the air.

The group stood in stunned silence as the creature dissolved into nothingness, leaving only the faint echo of its final scream lingering in the air.

7

The Whispering Dark

Kaito gasped for air as the creature's final scream faded into the night. His heart still pounded from the near-death experience, his mind reeling from the strange light he had seen within himself. The others gathered around, equally shaken but seasoned enough not to let fear overwhelm them. Grushak wiped dark blood from the blade of his axe, his face twisted in frustration, while Sylvara retrieved her arrows with a frown.

"That wasn't a normal beast," Borin muttered, glancing at the blackened spot on the ground where the creature had dissolved. "It moved like it wasn't from this world."

"No, it wasn't," Sylvara confirmed, her voice tight. "It's the old magic—the kind we've only heard about in stories. Darker than anything we've faced before."

Kaito remained quiet, still trying to make sense of what had just happened. The warmth inside him, the glow on his dagger—it had felt like something more than luck. Could it have been the beginnings of the divine blessing he was seeking? But why now? And why him? He wasn't trained, wasn't experienced in this world's magic.

Grushak broke the silence. "Whatever that thing was, it won't be the last we face in Valkra. The warlords have stirred something deep in the ground. The old powers are waking up."

The orc's words sent a chill through Kaito. Old powers. Was this what the Guild leader had warned him about? The ancient magic that was rising, the dark force from the forsaken lands? If these creatures were just the beginning, the

path to the temple would be more dangerous than he had ever imagined.

“Rest while you can,” Grushak growled. “We move at dawn.”

That night, as the campfire crackled and the group took turns on watch, Kaito lay awake, staring up at the dark sky. The stars were obscured by the swirling clouds that hung over Valkra, casting the land in an eerie, otherworldly glow. Sleep eluded him, his mind constantly drawn back to the moment when the light had flared from his dagger. It had felt so familiar, yet so foreign at the same time.

He clenched the dagger in his hand now, feeling its weight, as though it might offer some clue. The blade was simple, unremarkable, and yet in that crucial moment, it had become something more. The gods, the blessings, the divine favour he sought—they had to be real. That light couldn’t have been a coincidence.

But before Kaito could dwell on the thought any longer, a soft sound broke through his reverie. It was a whisper—a faint, almost imperceptible voice that seemed to come from all directions. He sat up, looking around, but the camp was silent. Grushak was on watch, sitting by the fire, his eyes alert and scanning the darkness beyond.

Kaito’s brow furrowed. He had heard it, hadn’t he?

The whisper came again, stronger this time, like a breath of wind across his ear. The words were unintelligible, but the tone carried a strange weight. It wasn’t a voice from any living creature. It was... something else.

Kaito stood, careful not to disturb the others, and moved toward the edge of the camp, away from the fire’s light. The whisper persisted, urging him forward, though he couldn’t explain why. His feet carried him through the rocky terrain, his eyes scanning the shadows cast by the moonlight. The wind

picked up, carrying with it the distant sound of creaking trees and rustling leaves, but there was no life in this place. Valkra's wilderness was silent, save for the whisper.

Come.

Kaito froze. The word was clear now, unmistakable. It reverberated through his mind, compelling him to continue. He stepped forward, his pulse quickening as the path ahead seemed to darken even more. But he couldn't stop. Something was pulling him in, something beyond his control.

As he rounded a large boulder, the landscape opened up into a small clearing, and at its centre stood a structure. It wasn't large, barely more than a shrine, but it was ancient, its stone walls cracked and weathered by time. Vines and moss clung to its surface, and the faint glow of old runes pulsed along the edges of the stone, giving off an eerie, dim light.

The whispering grew louder as he approached, the air around him thick with a presence he couldn't define. The shrine felt alive in a way that was unsettling, as if it had been waiting for him, calling him to this place. He hesitated at the entrance, his instincts screaming for him to turn back. But the whisper wouldn't stop.

Come closer.

With a deep breath, Kaito stepped inside.

The air inside the shrine was colder than the outside, and the shadows seemed to press in around him, making it hard to see more than a few feet ahead. The runes on the walls pulsed faintly, casting the chamber in a soft, ghostly glow. At the centre of the room, an altar stood, worn and cracked, but with a dark object resting upon it.

Kaito's heart raced as he approached the altar, his eyes fixed on the object. It was a shard—small, jagged, and pulsing with

the same dark energy that had surrounded the creature they had fought earlier. But this was more concentrated, more intense. The moment his gaze fell on it, the whispering stopped, replaced by a silence so profound that Kaito could feel the weight of it pressing on his chest.

Take it.

The command was clear, but Kaito hesitated. Everything in him screamed that this was wrong, that the shard was dangerous, cursed even. But at the same time, he felt drawn to it, as though it held the answers he sought. His hand inched closer, trembling slightly as it neared the shard. The air seemed to pulse with energy, and his vision blurred for a moment, his mind filled with images of battles, fire, and shadows rising across the land.

But just as his fingers brushed the shard, a hand gripped his arm with brutal force, yanking him back.

"What are you doing?" Sylvara's voice cut through the silence like a knife, her grip tight as she pulled him away from the altar. Her eyes were wide with anger and something else—fear. "You're messing with something you don't understand."

Kaito's breath came in ragged gasps as he stumbled back, the trance-like pull of the shard broken. His mind swirled with confusion and the lingering echoes of the whisper.

Sylvara didn't let go of his arm, her face set in a grim scowl. "This place is dangerous. We shouldn't have come this close to it."

"What was that thing?" Kaito asked, his voice barely above a whisper, still reeling from the intensity of the moment.

"It's a remnant," Sylvara explained, her voice harsh. "A shard of the old magic that once ruled these lands. It's what's corrupting Valkra, and it's why we're seeing more of those creatures. Dark forces are trying to harness it, and if you had

touched it..." She trailed off, her eyes narrowing. "You might not have come back from it."

Kaito felt a cold sweat break out on his brow. "I didn't mean to—I just felt something... pulling me."

"That's the nature of dark magic," Sylvara said, her voice softening slightly. "It tempts. It whispers. But if you give in to it, you lose yourself."

She released his arm and turned back toward the entrance. "Come on. We need to get back to the others before they notice we're gone."

As they made their way back to the camp, Kaito's thoughts were racing. The shard, the whispers, the pull of the dark magic—it was all connected to the rising danger in Valkra. And somewhere out there, someone was trying to harness that power.

Kaito shivered, his hand tightening around the hilt of his dagger. He couldn't let that happen. But deep down, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was already entangled in something far larger than himself, something that went beyond his quest for the temple's blessing.

As they returned to camp, Grushak looked up, his eyes narrowing as he took in their expressions. "Everything alright?"

Sylvara nodded curtly, but Kaito remained silent, his mind still replaying the encounter with the shard.

The darkness was growing. And Kaito was beginning to realise that his journey was no longer just about proving himself as a paladin.

It was about stopping whatever was coming for them all.

8

New Faces, New Alliances

The journey north continued at a gruelling pace. After their encounter with the dark creature and the ancient shard in the shrine, the group was more cautious than ever, and a sense of urgency gripped their every step. The road became less defined, twisting through rocky valleys and treacherous cliffs as they entered deeper into Valkra, a land still scarred from ancient wars. But the oppressive darkness was not the only thing that awaited them; scattered settlements and towns clung to life in the shadow of the rising threat.

After three more days of hard travel, the group finally reached the outskirts of Blackridge, a frontier town on the edge of Valkra's lawless borders. The town was a patchwork of rough stone buildings and wooden huts, built defensively into the hillsides, with watchtowers and barricades scattered along its perimeter. Kaito could see the banners of various mercenary bands hanging from the battlements, fluttering in the bitter wind. Blackridge was a melting pot of all races, each faction here for a different purpose—trade, survival, or power.

The streets were bustling despite the grim surroundings. Humans, orcs, dwarves, and even a few elves milled about the market square. Kaito's eyes widened at the sight of a gnoll merchant—a creature with the head of a hyena and a lean, predatory frame—haggling over a pile of pelts. These races, normally at odds with one another in other parts of the world, seemed to coexist here, united by necessity rather than trust.

"This is Blackridge," Grushak said, his voice low as they entered the town. "A place where you keep your head down and your coin hidden. We'll resupply here, but don't make trouble."

Kaito nodded, though his mind was reeling. This was the first real town he had encountered since his arrival in this world, and it was nothing like he had expected. The mix of races, the tension in the air—it felt like a place on the edge of chaos, where anything could happen. His eyes scanned the crowd, trying to take in as much as he could.

Sylvara led the way through the narrow streets, her eyes constantly flicking between the shadows of alleyways and the rooftops where archers and mercenaries kept watch. Borin and the human mercenaries, Nerik and Mara, moved closer together, their hands never far from their weapons. It was clear that while they weren't in immediate danger, Blackridge was a place where violence could erupt at a moment's notice.

As they reached the heart of the town, Kaito's eyes were drawn to a grander structure, a large stone building that dominated the town square. A faded banner hanging above the entrance marked it as the Silver Fang Inn, a gathering place for adventurers, traders, and mercenaries alike. From within, the sound of raucous laughter and the clinking of mugs could be heard, a sharp contrast to the ominous tension in the streets.

Grushak gestured toward the inn. "We'll rest here for the night. We need information—about the road to the temple and what's happening with the warlords. This is the place to get it."

The group entered the inn, the smell of roasting meat and spiced ale hitting Kaito as soon as they stepped inside. The inn was crowded, filled with adventurers of every race and background. Dwarves and humans sat together at long wooden tables, their weapons leaned against the walls as they shared stories and drank. Kaito even spotted a pair of Lizardfolk, tall reptilian creatures with scaly skin and elongated snouts, seated in a corner, their sharp eyes watching the room with careful calculation.

Grushak approached the bar, exchanging a few words with the barkeep—a stocky human with a scar running down his

cheek—before nodding toward a corner table. “We’ll sit there. Keep your eyes open.”

The group took their seats, and the barkeep soon brought over mugs of ale and platters of bread and roasted meat. Kaito couldn’t help but glance around the room, fascinated by the mix of people and creatures. There was a palpable sense of danger in the air, but also opportunity. In a place like this, alliances were made and broken just as easily.

As they ate, a tall, broad-shouldered Minotaur approached their table, his horns curling upward as his eyes landed on Grushak. “Haven’t seen your lot around here before,” the Minotaur rumbled, his voice deep and gravelly. “You here for trade, or something more interesting?”

Grushak looked up, not missing a beat. “Looking for news about the warlords in Valkra.”

The Minotaur grunted, pulling up a chair uninvited. “News is hard to come by in these parts. The warlords aren’t exactly fond of outsiders, and there’s been more movement in the shadows than out in the open. But if you’ve got the coin, I might be able to help you.”

Sylvara’s eyes narrowed, but Grushak raised a hand, signalling her to hold back. “Coin’s not a problem. What’s the movement?”

The Minotaur leaned in, his expression grim. “There’s been whispers about an alliance between the warlords. They’re gathering forces—mercenaries, orc clans, even dark magic users. Word is, they’re aiming to take more than just the borderlands. They’re after something big, something buried deep in Valkra. A weapon.”

Kaito’s pulse quickened. A weapon. Could it be connected to the dark shard he had encountered? The magic that had almost consumed him?

The Minotaur continued, lowering his voice. "Some say the warlords have already made contact with dark sorcerers from the east. They're working together to unearth an ancient power. Whatever it is, it's strong enough to tip the balance. If they get their hands on it, there won't be a kingdom in Galharn that can stop them."

Kaito exchanged a glance with Grushak, who frowned. "Where?"

The Minotaur shrugged. "Deep in Valkra, near the old ruins. You'll need to pass through Draighenholt to get there, a village controlled by the Valkran warbands. They keep to themselves mostly, but they're ruthless. If you're heading that way, be careful. Not everyone who enters Draighenholt leaves."

Grushak thanked the Minotaur, who rose and walked away, leaving the group in uneasy silence.

"So that's the game," Sylvara muttered, her voice tight. "The warlords are after an ancient weapon. We need to move faster."

"We still need to get through Draighenholt first," Grushak said. "We'll need a plan."

Nerik, who had been silent until now, leaned in. "I've got contacts in Draighenholt. Mercenaries who owe me favours. I can get us in, but after that, it'll be on us to find a way to the temple."

Kaito nodded, his mind racing. The temple wasn't just a place of divine blessing—it was tied to whatever ancient power the warlords were after. His mission wasn't just about proving himself as a paladin anymore. It was about stopping a force that could throw the entire world into chaos.

As the group made their plans, a figure approached their table, their hood pulled low over their face. Kaito tensed, his hand going to his dagger, but Grushak raised his eyes, unfazed.

The figure pulled back their hood, revealing a young Tiefling woman, her skin a deep crimson and two small horns curling from her forehead. Her golden eyes gleamed in the dim light, and she carried herself with the quiet confidence of someone who had survived in the shadows for too long.

"You're looking for information on the warlords," she said, her voice smooth. "I can help you."

Grushak eyed her warily. "What's your price?"

The Tiefling smiled, her sharp teeth catching the light. "Just a bit of company. I've got no love for the warlords, and I've got even less reason to trust the ones running Draighenholt. But I know how to get around without being noticed."

Sylvara's eyes narrowed. "What's your stake in this?"

The Tiefling shrugged. "Let's just say I've got my reasons for wanting to see the warlords fail. You help me, I help you. Simple as that."

Grushak glanced at the group, weighing their options. Finally, he nodded. "Fine. But if you cross us..."

"I won't," the Tiefling said smoothly. "You can call me Seris. And if you want to make it through Draighenholt alive, you're going to need me."

As Seris sat down with the group, Kaito couldn't help but feel the tension tightening. They were heading deeper into a land where alliances shifted as easily as the wind, and danger waited around every corner. But for the first time since his arrival in this world, he wasn't just a passenger in this journey.

He was a part of something bigger—a fight that could determine the fate of Galharn itself.

And as they prepared to leave Blackridge behind and head for Draigenholt, Kaito knew that whatever waited for them in the north, it was tied to the darkness rising across the land. The whispers he had heard at the shrine, the ancient shard, the warlords' pursuit of an old power—it was all connected.

The shadows were closing in, and Kaito was standing at the centre of it all.

9

The Fog of Secrets

The mood was heavy as the group left Blackridge behind. The deeper they moved into Valkra, the more oppressive the landscape became. The air felt thicker, the sky perpetually overcast, casting the land in a constant grey hue. The wind carried whispers—faint, unintelligible, but always there, like the ghosts of the past haunting the present.

Kaito could sense that everyone felt it too. Grushak's normally unflappable demeanour had become more guarded, and even Sylvara, usually calm and precise, was twitchy. Borin kept muttering under his breath about bad omens, while the mercenaries, Nerik and Mara, walked in silent vigilance.

Seris, their Tiefling guide, was the only one who seemed unaffected. Her lithe movements were confident, purposeful, and she always seemed to know where to go—even when the road ahead disappeared into the fog or crumbled away into jagged cliffs. Kaito couldn't shake the feeling that she knew more than she was letting on, but now wasn't the time for questions.

They were approaching Draighenholt, a small village just inside Valkra's borders, known to be a gathering place for warlords and their lackeys. It was the last place of any civilization before the true wilds of Valkra—before the ancient ruins, the forsaken temples, and whatever dark power lay waiting beneath the earth.

As they neared Draighenholt, something strange began to happen. The fog thickened, swirling unnaturally around them. It wasn't just the natural mist of a cold morning—it had weight, substance, and a deepening malevolence. Kaito felt a

chill crawl up his spine as the whispers in the wind grew louder, as though something in the fog was speaking directly to him.

"You feel it too, don't you?" Seris whispered, appearing at his side. Her golden eyes gleamed with a knowing light. "The fog... it doesn't come from the land. It's older, part of the dark magic that's been waking up."

Kaito nodded, unease twisting in his gut. "What is it? Another spell? Or a trap?"

"It's a warning," she said softly. "The warlords and their allies have been meddling with forces they don't understand. They've stirred something ancient... and now it's starting to take form. This fog? It's only the beginning."

Before Kaito could respond, a sharp, unnatural sound cut through the air—a high-pitched shriek, followed by the crash of something heavy in the distance. The group immediately froze, weapons drawn, scanning the surroundings. The fog obscured everything, and visibility was down to mere feet.

Sylvara moved swiftly, an arrow notched in her bow. "Whatever that was, it's not far."

Grushak growled, gripping his axe tighter. "We need to push on. Whatever's out there won't wait for us to figure it out."

The shriek came again, louder, and this time accompanied by the sound of running footsteps. The fog parted just enough for Kaito to see a figure sprinting toward them from the mist—a ragged man, bloodied and wild-eyed, his clothes torn. His breath came in frantic gasps as he stumbled toward the group.

"They're coming!" the man shouted, his voice filled with terror. "Run! You have to run! They're everywhere!"

Before anyone could react, a dark shape shot out of the fog behind the man. It moved with unnatural speed, almost a blur. It was humanoid, but twisted—its body tall and emaciated, with long, clawed hands and glowing red eyes. The creature was upon the man in seconds, dragging him to the ground before he could scream.

Kaito's heart pounded in his chest as the creature tore into the man, its claws ripping through flesh with horrifying efficiency. Grushak was the first to move, charging forward with a roar, his axe gleaming as it cleaved through the air. The creature turned its glowing eyes toward him and hissed, leaping back into the fog with unnatural grace before Grushak's axe could land.

"Get ready!" Grushak shouted, his voice echoing in the mist. "There's more of them!"

The fog seemed to come alive then, shapes moving within it—more of the twisted creatures, their glowing eyes piercing through the haze. Kaito drew his dagger, adrenaline surging through his veins. He knew he wasn't prepared for this fight, not against these kinds of monsters, but he couldn't let fear paralyse him.

Sylvara fired off a volley of arrows, her precision remarkable even in the fog. Each arrow found its target, but the creatures seemed almost indifferent to the damage. They hissed and snarled but kept advancing, their movements swift and erratic.

"Stay close together!" Borin shouted, raising his hammer, the runes on its surface glowing faintly. "Don't let them surround us!"

Kaito felt his muscles tense as one of the creatures lunged at him, its claws aimed for his throat. He ducked under the swipe, slashing upward with his dagger. The blade cut into the creature's side, and for a brief moment, Kaito saw a faint

flicker of light—just like before. The creature shrieked in pain, recoiling as the light seemed to burn it from within.

The light again.

Kaito's mind raced. It had happened before, back in the cave with the shard. The faint glimmer of light that had reacted to the dark magic. He wasn't sure what it was, but it was his only chance. He focused, trying to summon that warmth, that light, from deep within.

Another creature came at him, its red eyes gleaming with malice. Kaito slashed again, this time willing the light to surface. The dagger glowed faintly, and when it connected with the creature, the light erupted, searing the monster's flesh. The creature let out a horrifying scream, dissolving into black mist that was swallowed by the fog.

Kaito gasped, his heart pounding, but there was no time to celebrate. The others were locked in combat with the remaining creatures. Sylvara moved like a shadow, her arrows flying faster than Kaito could track. Borin's hammer smashed into one of the creatures with a thunderous crash, and Grushak's axe tore through another with brutal efficiency. Even Nerik and Mara, normally more aloof, fought with surprising skill, cutting down the monsters that tried to flank them.

But it was Seris who shocked Kaito the most. The Tiefling moved with an otherworldly speed, her daggers flashing in the dim light as she danced through the fog, dispatching creatures with ruthless precision. She wasn't just a guide; she was a trained killer.

As the last of the creatures fell, dissolving into the fog, the group gathered around the fire, panting and bloodied but alive.

"What in the gods' names were those things?" Borin muttered, wiping the dark ichor from his hammer.

"Scavengers," Seris said, her voice cold. "Creatures born from the corruption in these lands. They're drawn to the magic—the same magic that's waking up the warlords. They feed on it."

Grushak frowned, his grip tightening on his axe. "If they're getting this bold, it means we're getting close. The warlords must be stirring up something big."

"We don't have much time," Sylvara added. "The more we delay, the stronger their forces will get."

Kaito remained quiet, his thoughts swirling. He couldn't shake the image of the light that had flickered from his blade, the way it had burned through the creature like a purifying flame. What was it? Why did it feel so familiar, yet so foreign?

His mission was becoming clearer, but also more complex. It wasn't just about proving himself worthy of the gods' blessing—it was about stopping whatever darkness was spreading across the land. Valkra was a battleground, and the warlords weren't just looking for power—they were looking for something ancient, something that could reshape the world.

The next day, the group reached Draighenholt. The village was nothing like Kaito had imagined. Instead of a bustling settlement, it was a ghost town. The buildings were weathered and dilapidated, with boarded-up windows and overgrown paths. A few flickers of light came from the inn and a few shops, but it was clear that most of the village's inhabitants had either fled or were in hiding.

"We're not welcome here," Seris muttered, her golden eyes scanning the shadows. "The warlords control this place. They've turned it into a staging ground for their plans."

Grushak nodded. "We don't need to stay long. Just gather what information we can and get out."

As they walked through the village, Kaito felt the eyes of unseen watchers on them. The tension was palpable, and every creak of a door or flicker of movement in the alleys made his heart race.

They entered the village tavern, a rundown building with faded banners on the walls and a handful of patrons who looked as rough as the village itself. The barkeep, a grizzled orc with a scar over one eye, gave them a wary glance as they approached.

"Travellers?" he growled, wiping a mug with a dirty rag. "Not many come through here without a reason."

"We're looking for information," Grushak said, keeping his voice low. "About the warlords and their plans."

The barkeep chuckled darkly. "Information comes with a price in this place. You got coin?"

Grushak reached into his pack and dropped a small bag of coins.

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Whispers in Draighenholt

Grushak dropped a handful of coins onto the bar with a dull clink. The barkeep, a grizzled orc with a weathered face, eyed the pile with a mix of suspicion and greed. He scooped up the coins, glancing around the dingy tavern before leaning in closer.

"You've bought yourself a few whispers," he growled, wiping his hands on his filthy apron. "But in this place, whispers are all you're gonna get."

Kaito looked around the tavern, his nerves on edge. The place was filled with rough-looking characters: mercenaries, warband deserters, and a few villagers who kept their heads down. The air was thick with tension, like a coiled spring ready to snap. Draighenholt wasn't just a place where people passed through. It was a staging ground for the warlords and the darker forces that had taken root in Valkra.

Grushak leaned on the bar, his tone dangerous but calm. "We're looking for information on the warlords. Rumours say they're after something more than just land."

The barkeep paused, his eyes flicking to the shadows in the corners of the room. He lowered his voice. "You're right to be cautious. The warlords ain't just rallying the orc clans for raids anymore. They're searching for something buried deep in these lands. The old ruins out in the wastes. The kind of power that could change everything."

Kaito's stomach twisted. The same ruins they were heading toward. The temple where he sought the gods' blessing. The warlords were after it too, but for far darker reasons.

"They say the warlords have made deals," the barkeep continued, "with sorcerers from the east. Dark magic. The kind that hasn't been seen in generations. They're digging for an ancient artefact—something older than the kingdoms, older than this land."

The air in the room seemed to grow colder. Kaito exchanged a glance with Sylvara, who had gone rigid, her hand gripping her bow tighter. Seris stood to the side, her golden eyes sharp as she listened. Even Borin, usually quick to dismiss rumours, looked grim.

"What kind of artefact?" Kaito asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

The barkeep's eyes flicked to him, narrowing slightly. "Nobody knows exactly what it is. Some say it's a weapon, others say it's a source of power. But everyone agrees on one thing—if the warlords get it, no kingdom will be able to stop them."

The group stood in tense silence, the weight of the information settling over them. This was bigger than any of them had realised. The warlords weren't just gathering forces—they were planning to unleash something ancient, something that could reshape the world.

"And how close are they to finding it?" Grushak pressed.

The barkeep shrugged. "Close enough. They've been digging near the old temple for weeks. The place is crawling with warbands and dark sorcerers. If you're planning on heading that way, you'd best be prepared. The temple might be your destination, but you won't be the only ones trying to get inside."

Kaito's heart pounded. The temple wasn't just his hope for becoming a paladin—it was at the centre of a larger conflict. The gods' blessing, the dark power, the artefact the warlords were seeking—it was all connected.

The barkeep straightened, glancing toward the door. "That's all I know. But be careful who you talk to here. Draighenholt's not a place for outsiders, and there are plenty of ears listening for warlord gold."

After leaving the tavern, the group reconvened in a small, shadowed alleyway near the edge of town. The atmosphere in Draighenholt was oppressive, the fog from earlier still clinging to the air like a shroud. Kaito could feel eyes on them, even though the streets seemed empty.

Grushak's expression was hard as he spoke. "We're running out of time. If the warlords are this close to finding the artefact, we need to move now. We can't wait for them to open that temple."

"But what happens if we get there first?" Kaito asked, his mind racing. "We don't know what's inside. What if the artefact is something no one should have?"

"It doesn't matter," Sylvara said firmly. "We can't let the warlords get it. Whatever it is, it's better in our hands than theirs."

Kaito nodded, but the uneasy feeling wouldn't leave him. There was still so much they didn't understand about the temple, the artefact, and the dark magic awakening in Valkra. And there was something else—something nagging at the back of his mind ever since he had first touched the dark shard. The faint light he had summoned in the fight against the twisted creatures... it was connected to all of this, somehow.

Seris spoke up, her voice calm but edged with warning. "We'll need more than just weapons to get into that temple. The warbands are already entrenched. They won't let us walk in without a fight."

"And then there's the magic," Borin added, his voice grim. "The fog, the creatures—it's not natural. The closer we get, the worse it'll be."

"We can handle it," Grushak said, his voice full of grim resolve. "We don't have a choice."

As they discussed their next move, a figure stepped out of the shadows, startling the group. It was a young woman, dressed in rough, tattered clothing, her face streaked with dirt. She looked desperate, her eyes wide with fear.

"Please," she whispered, her voice trembling. "You have to help me. They're coming. They'll kill us all."

Sylvara was the first to move, drawing her bow, but Kaito stepped forward, his instincts telling him this girl wasn't a threat.

"Who's coming?" Kaito asked, his voice gentle.

"The warbands," she said, her voice frantic. "They've taken control of the village. They've been waiting for... for people like you. They knew you'd come. They're watching, waiting to ambush anyone who tries to leave."

Kaito's blood ran cold. "How many are there?"

"Dozens," the girl whispered. "Maybe more. They've been hiding in the fog, watching the roads. You can't leave without them knowing."

Grushak growled, gripping his axe tighter. "Then we'll cut our way through."

"That's not an option," Seris muttered, her golden eyes narrowing. "If they're watching the roads, they'll pick us off before we even get close to the temple. We need another way out."

The girl hesitated, glancing around as if afraid she'd be overheard. "There is another way. It's risky, but it might be your only chance. The old catacombs beneath the village... they lead to the outskirts of the ruins. Few know of them, but I can show you."

The group exchanged glances, weighing the risks. Grushak finally nodded. "Show us."

The catacombs were damp and suffocating, the air thick with the stench of decay. The girl led them through narrow, crumbling tunnels, her pace quick but cautious. The deeper they went, the more oppressive the atmosphere became. Kaito could feel the weight of the earth pressing down on him, the darkness closing in.

The walls of the catacombs were etched with strange symbols, some faded and broken, others glowing faintly in the dim light of their torches. Kaito ran his fingers over one of the symbols, feeling a strange energy pulse beneath his skin. These catacombs were ancient, older than the village above. They had been built for a purpose, though what that purpose was, he couldn't say.

"These tunnels have been here for centuries," the girl whispered as they descended deeper. "They were once used by the priests who worshipped at the temple. But that was long ago, before the warlords came, before the dark magic awoke."

Seris, walking just behind Kaito, glanced at the walls with suspicion. "These symbols... they're not just decoration. They're wards. Protective magic, meant to keep something out. Or keep something in."

Kaito's unease grew. The deeper they went, the more he felt like they were walking into something dangerous, something far older than the warbands or the temple itself. Whatever was

buried beneath Valkra, it wasn't just dark magic—it was something ancient, something that had been sealed away for a reason.

Finally, they reached a large chamber, the ceiling high and vaulted, with several tunnels branching off in different directions. The girl pointed to one of the tunnels, her voice barely above a whisper. "That path leads to the surface, just outside the ruins. You can follow it to the temple."

"Thank you," Kaito said, but before he could say more, the girl turned and disappeared into the shadows of the catacombs, leaving them alone.

As the group moved toward the tunnel, Kaito couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. The walls seemed to hum with energy, the symbols glowing brighter as they approached. The air was thick with magic, and Kaito's senses were on high alert.

"We're close," Grushak muttered, his voice low. "Keep moving."

But just as they reached the entrance of the tunnel, a deep, guttural voice echoed from the shadows behind them.

"You shouldn't have come here."

The group spun around, weapons drawn, as a figure stepped out from the darkness—a towering, armoured figure, his face obscured by a dark

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Beneath the Dark Earth

The voice reverberated off the stone walls of the catacombs, sending a cold chill through Kaito's body. The towering figure emerged from the shadows, cloaked in dark armour etched with symbols that pulsed with a malevolent light. His face was hidden beneath a helmet adorned with jagged horns, and his eyes—glowing a sickly red—locked onto them with a piercing gaze. Behind him, more figures emerged from the darkness—warriors clad in similar dark armour, their faces obscured, their presence oppressive.

Grushak stepped forward, his axe gleaming in the dim light. "Who are you?"

The armoured figure didn't answer immediately. Instead, he took a step closer, his heavy boots echoing in the stone chamber. His voice, when he spoke again, was low and resonant, filled with malice. "You are trespassing in a place long forgotten. These catacombs belong to the ancient ones, and your presence is an offence."

Kaito tightened his grip on his dagger, his heart racing. Something about this figure was wrong—his very presence radiated dark power, something old and twisted, like the creatures they had encountered before, but far more dangerous.

"We don't want trouble," Kaito said, trying to keep his voice steady. "We're just passing through."

The armoured figure tilted his head, almost as if considering Kaito's words. Then, he laughed, a low, hollow sound that sent a wave of dread through the chamber. "Passing through? You cannot simply walk in the shadow of the ancient ones and

leave. You have stepped into the heart of darkness, and now it will consume you."

Before anyone could react, the warriors behind the armoured figure surged forward, their weapons drawn. The group barely had time to raise their own weapons before the clash of steel echoed through the chamber.

Grushak roared as he swung his axe, meeting the first attacker head-on. His strength was immense, but the dark warrior was fast, parrying the blow with supernatural agility. Sylvara moved like a shadow, her bow loosing arrows with deadly precision, but the dark warriors seemed almost impervious to the damage. Borin's hammer crashed into one of the figures, sending it staggering back, but it recovered quickly, its eyes burning with fury.

Kaito found himself face-to-face with one of the armoured warriors. The figure moved with unnatural speed, its sword slashing toward him. Kaito barely blocked the blow with his dagger, the force of it sending a shockwave through his arm. He stumbled back, heart pounding, as the warrior advanced, its red eyes locked onto him.

The air around them seemed to hum with dark magic, the oppressive energy making it hard to think, hard to breathe. But as the warrior raised its sword for another strike, Kaito felt the warmth inside him stir again—the same light that had flickered during their fight in the fog.

He didn't have time to think. He focused on that warmth, willing it to the surface, and just as the warrior's blade descended, Kaito thrust his dagger forward. The blade glowed with a faint light, and as it connected with the warrior's armour, the dark figure let out a terrible shriek. The light burned through the darkness, and the warrior dissolved into black smoke, its form disintegrating as if it had never existed.

Kaito stood there, panting, his heart racing. The light—it had worked again. But he didn't understand how or why. All he knew was that it was his only chance of surviving.

The battle around him was chaos. Grushak fought with a fury unmatched, his axe cleaving through one of the dark warriors with a brutal swing. Sylvara moved with grace, her arrows finding their mark, while Borin and the mercenaries held the line, smashing through the attackers with brute force.

But the dark armoured figure—the leader—stood untouched, watching the fight with a grim satisfaction.

"You fight well," the figure said, his voice dripping with contempt. "But you cannot win. The darkness in these lands is older than you. It has waited for millennia to rise again, and you are nothing more than a fleeting moment in its path."

Kaito clenched his jaw. He didn't understand what this figure was, or what he represented, but he knew one thing—if they didn't get out of these catacombs, they wouldn't live long enough to find the answers.

"We need to get out of here!" Kaito shouted, blocking another blow from one of the dark warriors.

Seris, who had been fighting at the edges of the group, appeared beside him, her golden eyes flashing. "There's an exit up ahead. If we push through, we can escape."

Grushak nodded, his face twisted in a snarl as he blocked another attack. "Then move!"

The group began to retreat, fighting their way toward the tunnel the girl had told them about. The dark warriors pressed in from all sides, their numbers seemingly endless, but the group fought with everything they had. Kaito could feel the exhaustion setting in, his muscles burning with every strike, but he couldn't stop. Not now.

As they reached the entrance to the tunnel, the armoured leader stepped forward, raising one hand. Dark energy pulsed from his palm, filling the chamber with a cold, suffocating force. The ground shook, and the very walls of the catacombs seemed to pulse with dark magic.

"You will not leave," the figure said, his voice a command that reverberated through the air. "The darkness will consume you."

Kaito felt the oppressive energy pressing down on him, the warmth inside him flickering, struggling to stay alight. The others were fighting just to stay on their feet, their movements slowed by the overwhelming force of the magic.

But Kaito couldn't give up. Not here. Not now.

He focused again, reaching deep within himself, searching for that light. It was faint, but it was there, burning like a small ember in the depths of his soul. He didn't know how to control it, didn't understand where it came from, but he had no choice but to trust it.

With a shout, Kaito thrust his dagger forward, and the light erupted from the blade, brighter than before. It wasn't just a flicker this time—it was a wave of light, pure and powerful, that surged through the chamber. The dark energy recoiled, the oppressive force breaking apart as the light spread, pushing back the darkness.

The armoured figure staggered, his red eyes widening in shock. "What... is this?"

The light engulfed the chamber, burning through the dark magic, and the warriors dissolved into smoke, their forms vanishing as the light overwhelmed them. The leader let out a furious roar, but even he was forced to retreat, the dark energy crackling around him as he vanished into the

shadows, his form disappearing into the depths of the catacombs.

And then, there was silence.

The group stood in the dimly lit tunnel, breathing heavily, the oppressive weight of the darkness finally lifted. The catacombs were quiet, the dark warriors gone, but the air was still thick with tension.

"What... what was that?" Borin asked, his voice hoarse, his hammer resting heavily on the ground.

"I don't know," Kaito admitted, panting. "But that light... it's the same one from before. I can't control it, but it's the only thing that seems to work against the darkness."

Grushak grunted, wiping blood from his face. "Whatever it is, it saved us."

Sylvara looked at Kaito, her expression unreadable. "That light... it's not just any magic. It's divine. It's coming from the gods."

Kaito frowned. "But I haven't received the blessing yet. I'm still—"

Seris stepped forward, her golden eyes narrowed in thought. "Maybe you haven't officially received the blessing, but you're connected to something. That light—it's more than just power. It's part of the ancient forces at play in Valkra. Forces older than even the gods we know."

The group exchanged uneasy glances. Whatever Kaito had tapped into, it was far more than just a path to becoming a paladin. He was connected to something ancient, something deeply intertwined with the rising darkness in Valkra.

Grushak broke the silence. "We don't have time to figure it out here. We need to keep moving, get to the temple before the warlords do. If Kaito's power is tied to whatever's buried in that temple, we need to get there first."

Kaito nodded, though the weight of what had just happened still pressed heavily on his mind. The light within him wasn't just his salvation—it was a key to something much larger. And whatever it was, the warlords—and the dark figure that had attacked them—knew it.

As they pushed forward through the catacombs, Kaito couldn't shake the feeling that this was only the beginning. The deeper they went into Valkra, the more he would have to confront not only the rising darkness, but the mysterious power growing inside him.

And in the depths of those forgotten tunnels, Kaito could feel the ancient magic stirring.

12

Unwelcome Faces, Hidden Paths

The group emerged from the catacombs into the cold, biting air of the Valkran wilderness. The oppressive fog that had followed them through Draighenholt still clung to the landscape, but the air outside felt lighter than the dark magic they had faced beneath the earth. Kaito breathed deeply, the fresh air a small relief after the suffocating confines of the ancient tunnels.

But the world above was no safer than what lay beneath. Valkra was a land teetering on the edge of chaos, and their journey to the temple was far from over.

As they stood on the rocky outcrop overlooking the wild, Grushak grunted, hefting his axe back over his shoulder. "We need supplies and a place to rest. Can't push forward without regrouping."

Kaito nodded in agreement, feeling the ache in his muscles. The battle in the catacombs had taken its toll on all of them. His connection to the strange light within him had saved them, but he still had no idea how to control it, or what it truly was. He couldn't shake the memory of the dark figure—its words, its power. It was clear that the warlords had allied themselves with forces far darker and older than anyone realised.

"We can't afford to linger too long," Seris added, her sharp eyes scanning the horizon. "The warlords' scouts will be

looking for us, and they won't stop. But I know a place we can resupply—a village not far from here, hidden in the forests."

Grushak glanced at her, his scepticism clear. "Another village in Valkra? I thought most of these places were either under warlord control or abandoned."

Seris smirked. "Not this one. Redwater is different. The warlords leave it alone for the most part. It's small, off the main roads, and fiercely independent. They don't take sides, but they'll trade with anyone who can pay. We'll be able to get what we need there."

Kaito could sense the tension rising in the group. They were exhausted, on edge, and the recent encounters had rattled them more than they wanted to admit. But Seris was right—they needed supplies. They couldn't afford to continue toward the temple without food, rest, and some sense of direction.

"Let's move," Kaito said, adjusting the pack on his shoulders. "Redwater's our best chance."

The journey to Redwater took most of the day. The forest they travelled through was dense and wild, the trees tall and ancient, their twisted branches reaching toward the sky like skeletal hands. Despite the relative quiet of the forest, Kaito couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. Valkra was alive with dark magic, and it clung to everything—the air, the land, the trees. The weight of the looming conflict was palpable.

By the time they reached the outskirts of the village, the sun had dipped low in the sky, casting long shadows through the trees. Redwater was small, tucked away in a secluded valley with only a few buildings clustered around a large central well. Smoke rose from the chimneys of simple wooden houses, and the smell of roasting meat hung in the air. Unlike Draighenholt, there was no visible tension here. The village had an air of

quiet resilience, the kind of place that had survived by staying out of sight.

As they approached, the villagers stopped what they were doing, their eyes locking onto the newcomers. There was a brief, stunned silence, and Kaito noticed several of them whispering among themselves, their eyes wide. It took him a moment to realise what was happening—they were staring at him.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection in a nearby window. The broad, green skin, the tusks—his orcish form. In the chaos of battle and travel, Kaito had grown somewhat accustomed to his new body, but to these villagers, the sight of an orc walking into their quiet haven must have been shocking. He stood a head taller than anyone else, his hulking frame drawing immediate attention.

An older man, the village leader by the look of him, stepped forward, his face pale and his voice tense. “What’s... what’s an orc doing here?”

The question hung in the air, thick with suspicion. The other villagers, clutching tools or hiding behind doors, seemed equally unsettled. Orcs in this region were known for being warband raiders, mercenaries for the warlords—enemies.

Before Kaito could speak, Grushak stepped forward, his voice gruff but steady. “We’re not here to cause trouble. We just need supplies and rest. We’ll be gone by morning.”

The old man’s eyes darted to Kaito again, then to the rest of the group. His gaze lingered on Seris and Sylvara—both clearly out of place in this village. “We don’t usually get visitors out here, especially not... orcs. Are you with the warlords?”

Kaito’s stomach twisted, but he met the man’s gaze. “No. We’re not with them. We’re trying to stop them.”

The old man hesitated, his brow furrowing in confusion. "An orc, stopping the warlords?"

"I'm not like them," Kaito said firmly, trying to steady his voice. "I'm here for something else."

The villagers continued to murmur among themselves, but the old man seemed to relax slightly. He glanced at the rest of the group, then sighed. "Fine. You can stay for the night. But don't cause any trouble. Redwater's stayed out of the warlords' games for this long, and we don't intend to get dragged into them now."

With a nod, Grushak thanked the man, and the group followed him toward one of the larger buildings—the village's inn, a modest structure with a thatched roof and a sign that read The Red Boar. As they entered, Kaito could still feel the eyes of the villagers on him, their whispers following them like ghosts.

Inside the inn, the warmth from the fire and the smell of fresh bread provided some comfort after the long journey. They took a table in the corner, and the innkeeper—a stout woman with a wary glance—brought them bowls of stew and bread without a word. It wasn't much, but it was enough to give them strength for the days ahead.

As they ate, the tension in the group began to ease, though not by much. Borin was the first to speak, breaking the silence with a grunt. "We're gettin' closer to the temple, but so are the warlords. That catacomb business was just the beginning. The further we go, the worse it'll get."

Seris nodded, her sharp eyes watching the flickering fire. "The warlords won't stop until they get what they want. We're walking right into their territory now. The closer we get to the temple, the more likely they are to find us."

Kaito's thoughts drifted back to the strange light that had saved them in the catacombs. The power inside him—the

connection to something divine—was still a mystery. Every time he had summoned it, it had felt both foreign and natural, like a part of him that had been dormant, waiting to be awakened. But why him? Why now?

“I need to understand what this power is,” Kaito said quietly, drawing the group’s attention. “That light, the one I used in the catacombs... it’s more than just magic. It’s tied to something bigger.”

Sylvara’s eyes narrowed as she considered his words. “I’ve seen divine magic before, but what you’re using... it’s older, more primal. It’s possible the gods are guiding you, but we won’t know for sure until we reach the temple.”

“The temple’s not just a ruin,” Seris added. “It’s the key to everything that’s happening in Valkra. If the warlords find the artefact, they’ll unleash a power no one can control. But if you can harness it first...” She left the thought hanging, her golden eyes gleaming with an unsettling intensity.

Grushak leaned forward, his voice low and serious. “Whatever that power is, it’s not just about stopping the warlords. It’s about survival. This darkness is spreading. You’ve felt it, Kaito. You’ve seen it. The creatures we’ve fought, the fog, the magic—it’s all connected to what’s buried in that temple.”

Kaito nodded, his resolve hardening. He didn’t know what awaited them at the temple, but he knew one thing for certain: he couldn’t turn back now. The warlords were closing in, and so was the darkness. The power inside him, whatever it was, had chosen him for a reason.

But as the group continued their quiet discussion, the door to the inn swung open with a loud creak, and a figure stepped inside. He was tall and clad in dark leathers, his face obscured by a hood, but his posture was unmistakably that of a fighter. He scanned the room, his eyes landing on Kaito’s

table, and for a brief moment, Kaito felt a surge of recognition, though he couldn't place the man.

The figure approached, his steps slow and deliberate. As he reached their table, he pulled back his hood, revealing a sharp-featured man with dark hair and a scar that ran from his cheek down to his neck. His eyes gleamed with cold intensity as he sized up the group.

"Orcs don't usually travel with elves and mercenaries," the man said, his voice dripping with suspicion. "Especially not in Valkra."

13

A Stranger's Warning

Kaito's hand instinctively went to his dagger, but he hesitated, sensing the man wasn't here to fight. The stranger's cold eyes scanned the group, his posture tense but measured. He was a predator, that much was clear, but he wasn't reckless. He was sizing them up, assessing their threat level, and Kaito had the distinct impression that this man had seen plenty of combat.

Grushak stood, his large form casting a shadow over the stranger. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

The man's scarred face remained unreadable as he met Grushak's gaze. "Names don't matter here. I'm just a traveller passing through—same as you." His eyes flicked to Kaito, lingering for a moment before shifting back to Grushak. "But I've been hearing some interesting things. Rumours about a group headed toward the old temple. That wouldn't happen to be you, would it?"

Kaito felt a cold knot tighten in his stomach. How could this man know about their mission? They had been careful, staying under the radar since leaving Draighenholt. The warlords were already closing in, and the last thing they needed was more attention drawn to them.

Grushak's grip on his axe tightened, but he kept his voice calm. "Maybe. What's it to you?"

The stranger smiled, though there was no warmth in it. "You're walking into something far more dangerous than you realise.

The warlords aren't the only ones after the temple, and they're not the worst of what's waiting for you there."

Seris narrowed her eyes, clearly suspicious. "What do you know about the temple?"

The man shrugged, his expression casual. "I've been in Valkra long enough to know that the ruins of that temple hold more than just old stones and forgotten gods. The warlords are after the artefact buried beneath it, and they'll stop at nothing to get it. But there's something older, something darker than even they understand." He paused, his voice lowering. "The warlords think they can control it. They can't. No one can."

Sylvara, always sceptical of strangers, folded her arms. "And what's your interest in this? Why warn us?"

The man glanced at her, his eyes hardening. "Because I've seen what's coming. The warlords are fools. They're waking something up, something that's been asleep for centuries. If they succeed in unearthing that artefact, it won't just be Valkra that falls. The entire world will burn."

His words hung in the air, heavy with a warning that chilled Kaito to his core. The weight of their mission pressed down on him more than ever. He had known the temple held something dangerous, but this stranger was confirming their worst fears—whatever the warlords sought was powerful enough to threaten not just the balance of power, but the very fabric of the world itself.

Kaito's voice broke the tense silence. "You've seen what's in the temple?"

The man's cold eyes shifted to Kaito, his expression unreadable. "Not exactly. But I've seen enough. I've seen the twisted things the warlords have been using to dig deeper into the temple. I've seen the bodies they've left behind—those

who thought they could control the power down there." He shook his head. "It doesn't end well for anyone."

Grushak's growl was low and menacing. "You've told us a lot without saying what you want."

The man smirked. "What I want is to stay alive. And to make sure this power doesn't fall into the wrong hands. I've been tracking the warlords for weeks now, and I know how they operate. But I can't take them down alone. You're headed for the temple whether I warn you or not. So, my offer is simple: let me help. I can get you there. I know how they move, how they guard the ruins. You need someone like me."

The group exchanged uneasy glances. Trusting a stranger in Valkra was risky, especially one who seemed to know so much about the warlords' plans. But his knowledge of the temple could be the key to getting there before the warlords did.

Kaito looked to Grushak, who was studying the man carefully. Grushak wasn't easily swayed, and the weight of his decisions rested heavily on his broad shoulders. After a long moment, the orc gave a curt nod.

"Fine," Grushak said. "But if you try to cross us, I'll make sure you regret it."

The stranger's smile returned, thin and calculating. "You won't regret this."

"Good," Grushak replied. "Now, what do we call you?"

The man hesitated for the briefest moment before answering. "Name's Dorian."

The next morning, they set out from Redwater, the village quickly disappearing into the fog behind them. Dorian led the way, his movements confident, though he remained quiet, always scanning the horizon for signs of trouble. Kaito

couldn't help but wonder what kind of past this man had. His skill was evident, but his cold demeanour and the scar that ran down his face hinted at a long history of conflict. Trusting him was a gamble, but it was one they had to take.

The forest grew denser the farther they travelled, the trees gnarled and ancient, their roots rising from the ground like twisted veins. The fog remained thick, and the air felt heavier with each step they took. Kaito could feel the weight of magic around them, the same oppressive energy that had lingered in the catacombs.

As they walked, the group's mood was sombre, their minds focused on the growing danger. The temple was still days away, but Kaito could feel the pull of something deeper. His connection to the strange light inside him was growing stronger, and every step closer to the temple seemed to make it more intense.

It wasn't long before they came upon another village, but this one was vastly different from Redwater. Thornhold was a settlement built within the thickest part of the forest, its buildings constructed from dark wood and overgrown with vines. The houses were low and squat, blending into the natural landscape as if trying to hide from the world. The few villagers they saw moved with a nervous energy, their eyes darting from shadow to shadow as if expecting an attack at any moment.

Seris frowned as they entered the village. "This place has been touched by dark magic."

Kaito nodded in agreement. The air here felt wrong—tainted, as though the very ground was steeped in old curses.

The group made their way to the centre of the village, where an old woman was sitting by a well, her milky eyes staring blankly ahead. Her skin was wrinkled and pale, her hands

gnarled like the roots of the trees around her. She was humming a low, eerie tune that sent chills down Kaito's spine.

Borin, always blunt, spoke first. "We need supplies."

The old woman stopped humming and turned her head slowly toward them, as if sensing their presence. "Supplies?" she rasped, her voice dry and brittle. "You've come to the wrong place for that."

"We can pay," Grushak said, holding out a pouch of coins.

The woman cackled, a sound that grated against Kaito's ears. "Coins won't help you here. Thornhold isn't what it used to be. The magic in these woods has made us... different. Those who enter don't leave without paying the forest's price."

The group tensed, sensing the hidden danger in her words.

Sylvara stepped forward, her expression stern. "We're not looking for trouble. Just food, water, and a place to rest."

The old woman's milky eyes glinted with a strange light. "Then you must ask the forest for permission. The trees, they listen. But they do not forgive trespassers."

Kaito felt a strange tug deep within him, as if the forest was alive, watching, waiting for them to make a mistake. The magic here wasn't like the dark energy in the catacombs—it was older, raw, and tied to the land itself.

Before they could speak further, a group of villagers approached, their faces drawn and haunted. One of them, a tall man with hollow cheeks and wide eyes, stepped forward.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, his voice trembling. "The forest... it's angry."

Dorian crossed his arms, unimpressed. "We don't care about your superstitions. We need supplies and rest. Point us to what we need, and we'll be gone."

The man shook his head. "You don't understand. The forest takes what it wants. People have vanished... others come back changed." He glanced at Kaito, his eyes widening when he took in the orc's appearance. "And you... you don't belong here. The trees will know."

Kaito felt a cold shiver run through him. The man's fear was real, and the forest's magic, alive with ancient power, seemed to press down on him more with each passing second.

Seris turned to the group, her voice low. "This place isn't safe. We need to leave as soon as possible."

Kaito agreed. Something was very wrong in Thornhold, and whatever power had claimed the forest wouldn't let them leave without a fight.

As they prepared to make their way out of the village, the old woman's voice echoed after them. "Beware, travellers. The forest remembers those who trespass... and it will collect its due."

14

The Forest's Price

The air grew heavier as the group left Thornhold behind, its gnarled trees and dark magic fading into the thickening forest around them. Kaito could still feel the eyes of the villagers on their backs, and the old woman's words echoed in his mind: The forest remembers those who trespass... and it will collect its due.

Every step deeper into the woods felt like stepping into a different world. The trees were taller here, their branches twisted into unnatural shapes, and the underbrush was dense and alive with movement. The air hummed with an unseen force, a strange, pulsing energy that Kaito had felt in the village but now pressed on him even more intensely.

"There's something wrong with this place," Seris muttered, her voice low and cautious as they moved through the dense foliage. Her sharp eyes scanned the surroundings, her instincts on high alert. "We're not alone."

"We've felt that since we left the village," Grushak growled, his grip on his axe tightening. "Whatever's out there, we need to be ready."

The group moved cautiously, each of them tense and ready for whatever lay ahead. Kaito kept his dagger close, his heart racing as the oppressive magic of the forest seemed to press down on him. The strange warmth inside him—the divine light—felt muted here, as if the forest itself was smothering it. He could feel the trees watching, their presence more than

just the natural world; it was as though they were part of something ancient and alive.

Borin, who had been trudging ahead with his usual bluntness, suddenly stopped, his eyes narrowing as he knelt by the forest floor. "Tracks," he muttered, brushing aside some of the thick leaves. "Fresh. And not animal."

Kaito moved closer, peering down at the tracks. They were deep, large footprints, far too large for any human or even orc. They were something else entirely, something unnatural.

Sylvara bent down beside him, her keen elven eyes scanning the forest floor. "These tracks are recent. Whatever made them is nearby."

Dorian, who had been silent since their encounter with the villagers, finally spoke, his voice quiet but serious. "It's not the warlords' men. It's the forest. The villagers weren't lying—this place has a will of its own."

Kaito felt a cold shiver run down his spine. The old woman's words came back to him: The forest takes what it wants. He had thought it was just superstition, but now, standing here in the heart of the ancient woods, he wasn't so sure.

"We should move quickly," Seris said, her voice tense. "Whatever left those tracks is hunting."

Grushak nodded. "Stay close. No more delays."

They pressed on, but the deeper they ventured, the more the forest seemed to close in around them. The trees grew denser, their twisted branches weaving into a canopy that blocked out the light. The undergrowth was thick, making every step a struggle. And still, that strange energy pulsed in the air, growing stronger with every passing minute.

Kaito felt it—something was watching them. The same unseen force that had taken hold of Thornhold was here, lurking in the shadows, biding its time. The whispers in the wind, barely audible, grew louder, like the murmur of countless voices just out of reach.

Suddenly, a loud crack echoed through the forest, and the ground beneath them trembled. The group froze, weapons drawn, their eyes scanning the trees for any sign of movement.

“What was that?” Borin grunted, his hammer raised and ready.

Before anyone could answer, the trees ahead of them began to move—twisting and writhing as if they were alive. Kaito’s heart pounded in his chest as the roots pulled free from the ground, tearing through the earth with unnatural speed. The trees creaked and groaned, their branches reaching toward the group like claws.

“Back!” Grushak roared, swinging his axe at the encroaching branches. The blade bit deep into the wood, but the tree didn’t fall. Instead, it shuddered and lashed out, forcing him back.

Sylvara fired an arrow into the mass of twisting roots, but the forest seemed to absorb the blow, the energy around them growing more intense.

Kaito’s mind raced. They couldn’t fight the forest—it was too vast, too ancient. He felt the warmth inside him stir again, but it was faint, barely there under the weight of the magic pressing down on him.

“We need to run!” Seris shouted, already backing away as the trees closed in.

The group turned and bolted, running through the dense forest with the sound of cracking branches and shifting roots

behind them. The ground shook beneath their feet, and the air was thick with the scent of damp earth and something else—something ancient and malevolent.

Kaito ran as fast as he could, his heart pounding, his breaths ragged. The forest was alive, and it was hunting them.

They ran until their legs burned and their lungs ached, the trees never letting up. Every time they thought they had gained some distance, the forest would shift, closing in again, forcing them to change direction. It was as if the woods were leading them somewhere, pushing them deeper into the heart of its twisted domain.

Finally, they burst through a thick wall of undergrowth and into a small clearing. The air was still here, the oppressive energy of the forest fading slightly, though the presence of magic was still strong. At the centre of the clearing stood an old stone altar, covered in moss and vines, with strange runes etched into its surface.

The group came to a halt, breathing heavily, their eyes scanning the clearing. There was a sense of unease that filled the air, but it wasn't the same crushing malice they had felt in the forest. This place was different, older.

"What is this place?" Kaito asked, his voice hoarse.

Sylvara stepped forward, her eyes narrowing as she studied the runes on the altar. "These markings are ancient... older than anything I've seen before. This is a druidic altar. The forest guardians must have used it long ago."

Seris, standing beside her, crossed her arms. "The forest's magic is tied to places like this. That's why it's been hunting us—pushing us toward this altar."

Grushak growled, his eyes darting to the tree line. "So what now? We sit here and wait for it to swallow us?"

Kaito felt a strange pull toward the altar, as if the runes themselves were calling to him. The light inside him stirred again, stronger this time. He stepped forward, placing a hand on the cold stone. The moment his skin touched the surface, the runes glowed faintly, their light pulsing in time with the strange energy in the air.

The forest around them grew quiet. The shifting branches and creeping roots stopped, the oppressive magic pulling back slightly.

Kaito's heart raced as he felt the energy of the altar flowing through him. It was ancient magic, tied to the very essence of the land. But it wasn't dark—it was something else. Something neutral, a force of nature that existed beyond good or evil.

"This place... it's a key," Kaito murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "The forest wasn't just hunting us—it was guiding us here. The magic in these woods is tied to something deeper. Something older."

Seris stepped closer, her golden eyes narrowing as she watched the glowing runes. "If that's true, then this place might be more than just a forgotten altar. It could be connected to the temple we're heading for."

Grushak frowned. "How? This is miles from the temple."

Kaito shook his head, his thoughts racing. "The magic we've been feeling, the dark energy—it's connected. The forest, the warlords, the artefact—they're all part of the same ancient power. The temple is at the centre of it, but this place... this place is a piece of the puzzle."

Before anyone could respond, the ground beneath the altar began to tremble. The runes glowed brighter, and the air was filled with a low hum, like the distant echo of thunder.

Kaito stepped back, his heart pounding. "Something's happening."

The group drew their weapons, their eyes locked on the altar as the stone began to crack. Light poured from the fissures, illuminating the clearing in a pale, ethereal glow. The hum grew louder, the magic in the air intensifying.

And then, with a blinding flash, the altar shattered, the stones crumbling to the ground. In its place stood a figure—tall and cloaked in shadow, its form shifting and indistinct. The air around it crackled with energy, and the presence of ancient magic filled the clearing.

The figure's voice was like the wind through the trees, soft but carrying a weight of ages. "You seek the temple. You seek the power hidden within."

Kaito's breath caught in his throat. The figure wasn't human, nor was it any creature he recognized. It was something older, something tied to the land itself.

The figure's gaze shifted to Kaito, and its voice echoed in his mind. "You are the one the light has chosen. But the path ahead is fraught with danger. The temple holds more than you know."

Kaito stepped forward, his heart pounding. "Who are you?"

The figure tilted its head, the shadows swirling around it. "I am the guardian of this place, a remnant of the old ways. The power you seek was never meant for mortal hands."

15

Old Allies, New Paths

The figure's words hung in the air, as heavy as the magic swirling around the clearing. Kaito could feel the power thrumming in the earth beneath his feet, the ancient energy woven into every blade of grass, every twisted tree branch. Whatever this guardian was, it wasn't human. It was something older—something tied to the very core of the land itself.

"You must choose," the guardian continued, its voice like a distant storm. "The power buried within the temple is not meant for mortal hands. Yet it has been awakened. The warlords seek to control it, but they do not understand the cost. If you follow this path, the light within you will guide, but it will also demand a great price."

Kaito felt a deep unease settle in his gut. The light that had surfaced in his battles, the strange power that had burned through the dark magic in the catacombs—it was connected to the temple and whatever ancient force lay dormant beneath it. He had been drawn into something far bigger than himself, something that transcended the conflict between the warlords and the kingdoms.

"What is the power in the temple?" Kaito asked, his voice steady despite the weight of the question. "What will happen if the warlords reach it first?"

The guardian shifted, the shadows that cloaked its form rippling like smoke. "It is an ancient force, one that predates the gods you know. It is both creation and destruction, light

and darkness. The warlords seek only its power, but they will unleash its chaos. The balance of this world will be shattered."

Sylvara stepped forward, her bow still raised but her posture less hostile. "What is Kaito's role in this? You said the light had chosen him."

The guardian's gaze—or what passed for its gaze—shifted to Sylvara. "The light is a fragment of the divine essence. It is the force that opposes the darkness. But it is not a gift given lightly. Those who carry it bear great responsibility—and great sacrifice."

Kaito's heart pounded. This was more than he had bargained for. He had wanted to prove himself, to become a paladin despite the orcish body he had been trapped in. But now he was being asked to stop an ancient power from destroying the world. The stakes were higher than he'd ever imagined.

"What must I do?" Kaito asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

The guardian's form flickered, as if fading into the mist. "Go to the temple. Claim the power before the warlords do. But know this: once you touch the heart of that power, there is no turning back."

Before Kaito could ask another question, the guardian dissolved into a swirl of shadows and light, its presence vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. The clearing fell silent, the oppressive energy of the forest retreating, though the weight of the encounter lingered in the air.

Grushak grunted, stepping up beside Kaito. "That was... unexpected. But now we know for sure. The warlords are after something far worse than we thought."

Borin huffed, wiping sweat from his brow. "Aye, and if what that thing said is true, we need to get to that temple fast."

Seris, her sharp eyes thoughtful, nodded. "We don't have much time. The warlords will be moving on the temple soon, and we'll need to be ready for whatever is waiting inside."

Kaito remained silent, his thoughts racing. The temple was their next step, but the guardian's warning echoed in his mind. There is no turning back.

After another hard day of travel through the dense forest and crumbling wilderness, the group finally made it back to civilization. They emerged from Valkra's desolate edge and approached Eldrath, the fortified town where their journey had begun. The stone walls of the town rose in the distance, a welcome sight after their dangerous trek through the wilds.

As they neared the gates, the familiar bustle of merchants, guards, and adventurers filled the air. Kaito felt a strange sense of nostalgia—he had only been gone a short time, but it felt like a lifetime had passed since he had first arrived in this world, trapped in the body of an orc.

Seris, always sharp-eyed, glanced at Kaito. "We'll need to report to the Guild first. If what we've learned about the warlords is true, they need to know. We'll also need supplies and reinforcements."

Kaito nodded, though a part of him was anxious about returning to the Guild. The last time he had been here, he had been met with suspicion and doubt. Would they believe him now, after everything he had learned?

The group passed through the gates without issue, the guards recognizing Grushak's imposing figure and the rest of the group as seasoned adventurers. As they made their way through the crowded streets, Kaito couldn't help but notice the stares he was getting. His orcish appearance still drew attention, and though he had become somewhat used to it, the feeling of being an outsider never quite left him.

Finally, they reached the Guild Hall—a grand, towering building that dominated the centre of the town. Its stone façade was adorned with banners displaying the Guild’s emblem, and adventurers of all races and backgrounds moved in and out, some preparing for new quests, others returning from dangerous missions.

As they entered, Kaito felt a wave of memories wash over him. This was where it had all begun, where he had first learned of the temple and the rising darkness. The familiar faces of adventurers, some who had doubted him before, turned to look at him and his party—an orc, an elf, a dwarf, a Tiefling, and a handful of mercenaries.

Leira, the elven archer who had originally found him after he had been teleported to this world, was sitting at one of the long tables, poring over a map with Rogar and Ilyana, the other members of her party. When she looked up and saw Kaito, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Kaito?” she said, standing up and walking over to him. “I wasn’t expecting to see you again so soon.”

Kaito smiled, though it was tinged with weariness. “A lot’s happened since we left.”

Leira’s gaze shifted to the rest of the group, taking in the new faces. “You’ve gathered quite the party.”

“They’ve been a big help,” Kaito replied. “And we’ve learned a lot more about what’s happening in Valkra.”

Rogar, the dwarf warrior, joined them, his thick arms crossed over his chest. “I thought you were heading for the temple. Did something happen?”

“More than we expected,” Kaito said. “The warlords are after something ancient, something powerful. It’s not just about

territory or conquest anymore—they're trying to unleash a power that could destroy everything."

Leira's expression grew serious. "You'll need to tell the Guildmaster about this. If what you're saying is true, we'll need every able adventurer to stop them."

"Agreed," Kaito said. "But I also need to ask for more help. We can't do this alone."

The Guildmaster's office was a large room at the back of the hall, lined with maps, scrolls, and weapons from various expeditions. The Guildmaster himself, a tall, stern-faced man named Kaedric, sat behind a heavy oak desk, his eyes scanning a report as the group entered.

"Kaito," he said, looking up from his papers with mild surprise. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon. Last I heard, you were heading for the northern temple."

Kaito nodded, his expression serious. "We were. But we've uncovered something that you need to hear."

Kaedric leaned back in his chair, motioning for them to speak. "Go on."

Grushak stepped forward, his voice gruff but commanding. "The warlords are after something more than just control of Valkra. They're digging up an ancient power beneath the temple—something older than the gods. If they get their hands on it, there won't be anything left to fight for."

Kaedric's eyes darkened, and he sat up straighter, his interest clearly piqued. "Ancient power? Explain."

Kaito took a deep breath and relayed everything they had encountered: the dark creatures in the catacombs, the strange power in the temple, the encounter with the guardian, and the warlords' efforts to unearth the ancient artefact. As

he spoke, Kaedric's expression shifted from surprise to deep concern.

When Kaito finished, the Guildmaster was silent for a moment, processing the information. "This is worse than I thought," he said finally. "If what you're saying is true, we're not dealing with a simple territorial dispute. This could change the fate of the entire continent."

Leira, who had followed them into the room, stepped forward. "We need to act quickly. The warlords are gathering their forces, and if they reach the temple first—"

"They won't," Kaedric interrupted, his tone firm. "I'll rally the adventurers. We'll send a force to the temple to stop them."

Kaito felt a surge of relief, but it was tempered by the knowledge that the road ahead was still dangerous. The warlords were closing in, and the darkness within the temple was growing stronger. Even with the Guild's help, they would be facing enemies more powerful than anything they had encountered before.

As they left the Guildmaster's office, Kaito felt a renewed sense of purpose. The next stage of their journey would be the most crucial.

16

Band of Misfits

Kaito's party exited the Guildmaster's office, the weight of the coming battle with the warlords heavy on their minds. As they moved through the Guild Hall, Kaito couldn't help but glance at the faces around them—seasoned adventurers, fresh recruits, and battle-hardened warriors who had likely seen their fair share of dangerous quests. But none of them paid much attention to Kaito or his party, save for the occasional side-eye. He couldn't blame them; his group stood out, but not in the way typical adventurers did.

With Grushak, the towering orc leader, always at the front, and Borin the gruff dwarf walking with his hammer slung over his shoulder, they looked more like a band of mercenaries than an adventuring party. Add to that Sylvara, the sharp-eyed elf with her suspicious gaze, and Seris, the cold, calculating Tiefling whose golden eyes never stopped scanning the room, and they were far from the image of your typical questing crew. Then there was Dorian, the newest addition, a scarred and cynical rogue whose motives still remained unclear. And finally, Kaito—an orc in body but not in soul—leading them through a mission that was growing far larger than any of them had anticipated.

"We don't look like much of a typical adventuring party," Kaito muttered under his breath as they stepped back into the bustling town square.

Grushak grunted in agreement. "We're not exactly your standard do-gooders, kid. But that doesn't matter. We're strong enough to handle whatever comes next."

Seris flashed a rare smirk, her eyes glinting mischievously. "He's right, Kaito. We look like a band of mercenaries—because we practically are. Each of us has our

own reasons for being here. I doubt any of us would have worked together if it weren't for the circumstances."

Kaito chuckled softly, knowing she had a point. They were a strange assortment of individuals, each with their own motives, but their fates had become intertwined on this dangerous journey. It wasn't the bond of an adventuring party forged over time, but more a collection of people with overlapping goals.

Borin grumbled as he walked alongside them. "Mercenaries or not, we're gettin' the job done. And if the Guild sends reinforcements, we'll need all the hands we can get to keep those warlords from unlocking whatever cursed power is buried in that temple."

Kaito knew Borin was right. The stakes had never been higher, and the thought of facing not just the warlords but the ancient forces lurking beneath the temple sent a chill down his spine. Their journey was no longer just about stopping a band of marauders; it was about saving the world from a power too great to be unleashed.

As they made their way through the town, heading back to the inn where they'd rest and plan their next steps, Kaito noticed more of the strange looks they were getting. People whispered as they passed, their eyes lingering on Grushak and Kaito—two orcs walking side by side, surrounded by an eclectic mix of adventurers. The sight was uncommon, and Kaito could tell that many assumed they were dangerous.

They weren't wrong.

Back at The Bronze Axe, the same inn where Kaito had stayed when he first arrived in Eldrath, they gathered around a long table near the hearth, a few other patrons casting wary glances at them. The fire crackled warmly, though it did little to ease the tension that still hung in the air after their report to the Guildmaster.

Leira joined them, the elven archer's familiar face bringing a small sense of comfort to Kaito. She was one of the few who had accepted him for who he was, even after his transformation into an orc. Her party, however, still regarded him with suspicion, especially Rogar, whose gruff demeanour always seemed to get under Kaito's skin.

"So," Leira said, settling into a chair beside Kaito. "You've made some... interesting friends since we last saw you."

Kaito managed a wry smile. "I wouldn't call them friends, but we're working together. For now."

Grushak raised an eyebrow but said nothing, sipping from a mug of ale. Sylvara remained silent as well, her eyes still scanning the room for any sign of trouble. Seris, on the other hand, leaned back in her chair, her fingers idly toying with a dagger as she studied Leira with quiet interest.

"It's strange to see an orc with such... company," Rogar grunted from across the table, his eyes narrowing at Kaito. "Especially with a mission as important as this one."

Kaito sighed. "I didn't choose this form, Rogar. I've told you before—I'm not like the others. I'm trying to stop the warlords, not join them."

Rogar frowned but said nothing more. Ilyana, the human mage of Leira's group, finally broke the tension. "Regardless of appearances, it seems like you've managed to gather quite the force. You'll need it if the warlords are as close as you say."

Leira nodded. "We've been hearing rumours too. There's been movement along the Valkran border, and reports of strange creatures appearing in the wilderness. It's only a matter of time before they make a move."

Grushak leaned forward, his voice low and commanding. "That's why we're not wasting time. The Guild will send reinforcements, but we need to be ready. When we reach the temple, we'll be facing more than just soldiers. The magic there is old, and we still don't know what it will unleash."

Leira's face grew serious. "If what you say is true, then we need more than just swords and bows. We need to understand what we're up against."

"That's where I come in," Kaito said, drawing the group's attention. "I've been... connected to the power in the temple. I don't fully understand it yet, but the light inside me—whatever it is—it's the key to stopping the warlords. The guardian of the forest said the power in the temple can't fall into mortal hands, and it's up to us to keep it sealed."

Leira exchanged a glance with Rogar and Ilyana before turning back to Kaito. "This is far beyond what we imagined. The Guild's going to need more than just a team of adventurers for this. We'll have to convince them that this threat is as serious as you say."

"They'll listen," Kaito said firmly. "They have to."

Grushak grunted in agreement. "Let them send every sword they've got. We'll still need to reach the temple before the warlords do."

"Which means we need to move fast," Seris added, her golden eyes gleaming with intensity. "We're already being hunted. Every day we spend here is a day they're getting closer to the temple."

Kaito nodded. The sense of urgency was palpable. The Guild might send reinforcements, but there was no telling if they would arrive in time. The warlords were gathering their forces, and the closer they got to the temple, the more dangerous the journey would become.

"Then it's settled," Kaito said, standing up from the table. "We leave at first light."

The rest of the group followed suit, their resolve hardened by the knowledge of the battle to come. There was no turning back now. The temple and the ancient power it held were within reach, and the fate of the world rested on their ability to stop the warlords before it was too late.

That night, Kaito lay awake in his small room at the inn, his mind racing with thoughts of the journey ahead. The weight of his role in this growing conflict pressed down on him harder than ever. He had started this journey hoping to find the blessing of the gods, to prove that he wasn't just an orc, that he could be something more.

But now, he was no longer just seeking a personal redemption. He was trying to stop a force that could destroy everything—something ancient and beyond mortal understanding. The light inside him, the power that had surfaced in battle, was the key to it all. But Kaito still didn't know how to fully control it. And without control, how could he hope to use it against the warlords?

He turned over, staring at the ceiling. Tomorrow, they would leave Eldrath behind once again, and the next leg of their journey would take them directly into the heart of danger. The temple was waiting for them, and with it, the warlords and their twisted allies.

Kaito closed his eyes, his resolve steeling with each passing moment. No matter what happened, he would not let the darkness win. He would find a way to control the light within him and stop the warlords from unleashing the ancient power buried beneath the temple.

But as the night stretched on, Kaito couldn't shake the feeling that there were even greater challenges ahead. Challenges

that would test not just his strength, but the very essence of who he was.

And in the quiet darkness of the inn, as the town of Eldroth slept, Kaito made a silent vow.

I will not fail.

17

The Grand Journey Begins

The first light of dawn painted the sky in pale shades of orange and gold as Kaito's party gathered in the courtyard outside The Bronze Axe. The air was crisp, and a thin mist clung to the stone streets of Eldrath. The town was already stirring—merchants preparing their stalls, adventurers setting off on their own quests—but for Kaito and his companions, today marked the beginning of something far greater.

This wasn't just another mission. This was the start of their journey to the heart of Valkra, to the ancient temple where an unspeakable power lay hidden. A power that, if unleashed, would tear the world apart.

Grushak slung his massive axe across his back and gave the group a final once-over, his yellow eyes gleaming with determination. "Everyone ready?"

Kaito nodded, adjusting the strap of his pack. He had spent most of the night thinking, planning, and preparing for the journey ahead. It was clear now that their mission was no longer about just defeating the warlords; it was about stopping an ancient force from awakening. The stakes had never been higher, and the weight of that responsibility hung heavy on his shoulders.

As Kaito glanced around at his companions, he was reminded again of how strange their group was. They didn't look like the heroic adventuring parties he had read about in fantasy books back in his old life. Instead, they looked like a band of misfits, a ragtag group of mercenaries pulled together by fate rather than choice.

Grushak, the orc war veteran, was their unofficial leader, his rough exterior hiding the sharp mind of a strategist. Sylvara,

the elven archer, moved with a quiet grace, her keen eyes always watchful. Borin, the dwarf warrior, grumbled as he adjusted his hammer, but his loyalty and strength were undeniable. Seris, the enigmatic Tiefling rogue, was a mystery even to them, her motives always in question. And then there was Dorian, the scarred human rogue who had only recently joined their ranks, his dark past still shadowing him like a cloak.

Together, they didn't look like a group destined to save the world. But Kaito had come to trust them all in his own way. They had survived the dangers of Valkra's wilderness and the horrors of the catacombs beneath Draighenholt. Now, they would face their greatest challenge yet.

Leira, who had met them at dawn to see them off, stepped forward. Her elven features were calm, though her eyes betrayed a hint of worry. "The Guild is mobilising," she said. "They'll send reinforcements to the temple, but it'll take time. You'll be on your own until they arrive."

Kaito nodded, his mind racing with everything that lay ahead. "We'll make it to the temple. We don't have a choice."

Leira's eyes softened, and she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Stay safe, Kaito. And trust in the power you've found. It's stronger than you realise."

He gave her a small smile, grateful for her support. "We'll be fine. We've made it this far."

Rogar, standing beside her, gave a gruff nod. "The Guild will send the best we have. But you're walking into the heart of darkness. Be ready."

With their farewells said, the group turned to leave Eldrath behind. The road ahead stretched out before them, winding through the forested hills and into the untamed wilderness of

Valkra. Kaito took one last look at the town, then pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders.

The first few days of travel passed in relative silence. The land around them shifted from the rolling green hills outside Eldrath to the more jagged, rocky terrain as they neared the Valkran border. The skies were often overcast, the sun a faint glimmer behind thick clouds, casting the land in a perpetual twilight.

Kaito could feel the tension in the air. Every step brought them closer to the temple, and the presence of dark magic seemed to grow stronger the farther they went. Even the animals they passed in the wild seemed more skittish, as if they, too, could sense the growing danger.

Despite the quiet, Kaito couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. At night, when they made camp, he would find himself staring into the shadows beyond the fire, expecting to see glowing red eyes or the twisted shapes of the creatures they had faced before. But nothing came.

Still, the unease never left him.

On the fourth day, they crossed into Valkra.

The landscape changed dramatically. The trees became twisted and gnarled, their branches reaching toward the sky like skeletal fingers. The ground was uneven, cracked in places where deep ravines split the earth. The air was colder here, and a thin layer of fog clung to the ground, making it hard to see more than a few feet ahead.

"This place is cursed," Borin muttered, his eyes scanning the horizon. "The land itself feels wrong."

Seris, always on edge, nodded in agreement. "It's the magic. It's everywhere, seeping into the ground, the trees... everything."

Grushak grunted. "We knew it would be like this. Stay sharp."

The group pressed on, the atmosphere growing more oppressive with each passing hour. Kaito felt the weight of the magic pressing down on him, but alongside that darkness, he also felt the light within him stir. It was faint, like a candle in the wind, but it was there—an anchor in the storm.

As they moved deeper into Valkra, the landscape became even more treacherous. The paths were narrow, winding through steep cliffs and dense forests where the trees seemed to shift and move when they weren't looking. Strange sounds echoed from the distance—low, guttural noises that set their teeth on edge.

One evening, as they made camp near the edge of a ravine, Kaito found himself standing on a rocky outcrop, staring out over the desolate land ahead. The wind howled through the cliffs, and in the distance, dark storm clouds gathered.

Seris approached, her footsteps silent as always. "You're thinking about the temple," she said, her voice quiet but certain.

Kaito nodded, not taking his eyes off the horizon. "It's hard not to. We're getting closer. I can feel it."

Seris crossed her arms, her golden eyes watching him carefully. "You're worried about what you'll find there."

"Aren't you?"

She shrugged, a small smile playing at her lips. "I've learned not to worry too much about what's coming. In my line of work, worrying just slows you down."

Kaito chuckled, though there was no real humour in it. "Maybe. But it's not just the warlords I'm worried about. It's... this power

inside me. I don't know how to control it, and if it's tied to whatever's in that temple..."

Seris was silent for a moment, then she spoke, her voice softer. "Whatever happens, you're not alone in this. We're all in this together now."

Kaito looked at her, surprised by the unexpected sincerity in her words. For all her aloofness, Seris had proven herself time and time again. He gave her a nod, grateful for her support. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," she said, flashing him a rare smile before turning to head back to the camp.

As Kaito stood alone, the wind howling around him, he let his mind wander back to the temple. The ancient power that had called to him in the catacombs, the light that had saved them from the dark creatures—it was all connected. The guardian had warned him that there would be no turning back once they reached the temple, and Kaito could feel the truth of that warning settling deep within him.

Whatever happens next, he thought, we'll face it together.

He turned back toward the camp, the firelight flickering in the distance, and steeled himself for the journey ahead. Tomorrow, they would continue deeper into Valkra, closer to the temple and the ancient power that lay waiting beneath it.

18

Trials on the Road

The cold wind cut through the thick forest, carrying with it the distant sounds of creatures stirring in the shadows. The dense woods of Valkra loomed tall and imposing, their branches twisted and gnarled as though warped by the magic that suffused the land. Kaito's party continued their journey toward the ancient temple, but the road ahead was far from straightforward. The landscape itself seemed hostile, as if the land was trying to prevent them from reaching their destination.

They had been travelling for several days since entering the deeper parts of Valkra, and while they had encountered the eerie stillness of the wilderness and the constant sense of being watched, no direct threats had presented themselves. That sense of foreboding only heightened Kaito's unease.

Grushak, as always, led the way with his axe slung over his broad shoulders. He had become something of a guide in these treacherous lands, his experience as an orc warrior giving him an innate sense of danger. Beside him, Sylvara moved silently, her elven senses always attuned to the slightest changes in their environment. Borin and Seris flanked the rear, while Dorian hovered somewhere in the middle, quiet and alert. Kaito remained near the front, his thoughts heavy with the weight of what lay ahead.

Suddenly, Grushak raised a hand, halting the group. His yellow eyes narrowed as he scanned the area. "Something's up ahead."

Kaito instinctively reached for his dagger, his heart quickening. "What is it?"

Grushak pointed toward a cluster of trees where faint movement could be seen through the mist. "Looks like a caravan—though I can't tell if it's in trouble or just resting."

Seris narrowed her eyes, her golden pupils glinting in the dim light. "If they're smart, they wouldn't be out here unless they had no choice. Let's approach carefully."

The group advanced cautiously, their weapons at the ready. As they neared the clearing, they could see it more clearly—a small merchant caravan, the wagons circled defensively, with a handful of armed guards surrounding them. The tension in the air was palpable. Something wasn't right.

"Help! Please!" a voice called out from the camp.

Kaito moved forward, his instinct to help overriding his caution. As they approached, a middle-aged man, clearly the caravan's leader, rushed toward them, relief evident on his face.

"Thank the gods you've come," the man said, his breath coming in quick gasps. "We're in trouble. Creatures... something's been stalking us for days. We haven't been able to rest properly, and we've lost two guards already."

"Creatures?" Sylvara asked, her voice calm but concerned. "What kind of creatures?"

"We don't know," the man replied, shaking his head. "They stay in the shadows, but they attack at night. We've tried defending ourselves, but they're fast—too fast. We're heading to Redwater, but we won't make it without help."

Kaito exchanged a glance with the others. The journey was already dangerous enough, but leaving these people to fend for themselves would be a death sentence for the caravan.

Grushak grunted, eyeing the merchant. "We're on a mission, but we can't leave you to die. What do you need?"

"We need protection, at least until we're closer to the borders of Redwater," the merchant said. "If you could help us for just a day or two, we'll pay you. We don't have much, but we'll give you whatever we can."

Seris crossed her arms. "These creatures that attacked you—did you get a look at them? Anything we should know?"

The merchant hesitated, clearly unsettled by the memory. "They're... they're fast. We barely see them before they strike, but their eyes glow red in the night. They're like shadows, slipping through our defences. We think they're drawn to something we're carrying."

Kaito frowned. "What are you transporting?"

The merchant hesitated again, glancing nervously at the group. "It's an old artefact—a relic, really. We're transporting it to a collector in Redwater. But ever since we picked it up, we've been stalked."

Borin sighed. "Should've known it was something magical. Everything in these cursed lands is."

Kaito stepped forward. "Show us the artefact."

Reluctantly, the merchant led them to the centre of the caravan, where one of the wagons had been covered with thick blankets. He pulled them aside to reveal a small, ornate chest bound in iron. The chest gave off a faint, eerie glow, and Kaito could feel the dark magic emanating from it. Whatever was inside, it was powerful—and dangerous.

"We found it in the ruins north of Draighenholt," the merchant explained. "I thought it was just some old treasure, but now... I think it's cursed."

Seris let out a low whistle. “No wonder you’re being hunted. That thing’s like a beacon for every dark creature in Valkra.”

Kaito sighed, the weight of the situation settling in. They couldn’t afford to be delayed, but they also couldn’t ignore the fact that this caravan was in serious danger. And something about the artefact gnawed at him—it felt connected to the same dark magic that was rising across Valkra. Leaving it unprotected could spell disaster.

“We’ll help,” Kaito said, his decision final. “At least for the night. But we need to keep moving toward Redwater. The longer we stay in one place, the more danger we’re in.”

Grushak nodded, though his expression remained grim. “Fine. But don’t expect us to die for this thing. If it gets too dangerous, we’ll cut and run.”

The merchant looked grateful, though fear still clouded his eyes. “Thank you. We’ll do whatever you say.”

That night, the group set up camp around the caravan, each of them taking turns on watch. The forest around them was eerily quiet, the only sounds the crackling of the campfire and the occasional rustle of leaves. The fog had thickened, wrapping around the wagons like a shroud, and Kaito couldn’t shake the feeling that something was watching them from the shadows.

As his watch came, Kaito sat by the fire, his dagger resting across his lap. His thoughts drifted to the temple, to the power that waited for them there. Every step they took brought them closer to their goal, but the challenges along the way were growing more dangerous. The artefact in the caravan was proof of that—dark magic was everywhere, and it was drawn to them like a moth to flame.

Suddenly, there was a rustling sound in the trees, followed by a low, guttural growl. Kaito's heart skipped a beat, and he rose to his feet, his hand tightening on his dagger.

"Everyone, wake up," he called softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

The others stirred, immediately alert. Grushak was on his feet in seconds, his axe gleaming in the firelight. Seris and Sylvara moved silently to the edges of the camp, their weapons ready.

From the shadows, red eyes gleamed.

Kaito's blood ran cold as the creatures emerged from the forest, their forms barely visible in the thick fog. They were humanoid, but twisted and deformed, their bodies shrouded in darkness. Their eyes burned with an unnatural light, and their movements were fast—too fast.

"They're here," Sylvara whispered, notching an arrow in her bow.

The creatures attacked without warning, lunging at the camp with terrifying speed. Kaito barely had time to react before one of them was upon him, its claws slashing through the air. He dodged to the side, his dagger flashing out, but the creature moved like a shadow, slipping away before his blade could connect.

Grushak let out a roar as he swung his axe, cleaving through one of the creatures with brutal force. The creature screeched as it dissolved into a cloud of black smoke, its body vanishing into the night.

"We need to hold them off!" Grushak shouted, his voice booming through the chaos. "Protect the caravan!"

Kaito's heart raced as he fought off another of the creatures, his movements fueled by adrenaline. The light within him

flickered, responding to the dark magic of the creatures, but it remained faint. He couldn't rely on it—not yet.

The battle raged on, the creatures relentless in their assault. Sylvara's arrows flew through the air, each one finding its mark, while Seris darted through the shadows, her daggers flashing as she dispatched the enemies with lethal precision. Borin fought with brute strength, his hammer smashing into the creatures with bone-crushing force.

But for every creature they killed, more seemed to emerge from the forest, their red eyes gleaming with hunger.

Kaito's breath came in ragged gasps as he faced off against another creature, his dagger finally finding purchase in its chest. The creature let out a terrible shriek as it dissolved into smoke, but the victory was short-lived. Another took its place, lunging at him with blinding speed.

Suddenly, the chest in the wagon began to glow brighter, the dark magic within it pulsing like a heartbeat. Kaito felt the pull of it, the same dark energy that had drawn the creatures. It was growing stronger, threatening to overwhelm them.

"We need to get rid of the artefact!" Kaito shouted, his voice desperate.

Seris, always quick on her feet, darted toward the wagon, her eyes fixed on the chest. "I'm on it".

19

The Cursed Relic

The glow from the artefact intensified, casting an eerie, sickly light over the camp as the creatures continued their relentless assault. Kaito could feel the dark magic pulsing in the air, its malevolent energy drawing more and more of the twisted creatures toward them. Each heartbeat of the artefact seemed to summon another wave of attackers, their glowing red eyes flickering in the mist like torches of death.

Seris reached the chest, her movements precise despite the chaos. She threw back the heavy cloth that had covered it, her golden eyes narrowing as she examined the ornate box. The dark energy seeping from it was palpable, almost suffocating.

"We need to get this thing out of here!" she shouted, her voice sharp with urgency. "It's drawing them in!"

Grushak was already cutting down another creature, his axe carving a wide arc as he roared in frustration. "What do you suggest? Throw it into the woods and hope they follow?"

Kaito slashed at one of the creatures as it lunged at him, barely managing to drive it back before it vanished into a cloud of dark smoke. "If we destroy the artefact, will that stop them?"

Seris hesitated, her gaze locked on the chest. "Destroying it could release even more dark magic. We don't know what's inside, and if we're wrong..."

Kaito's heart raced. They didn't have time to debate. The creatures were closing in faster than they could kill them, and the magic surrounding the artefact was becoming more dangerous by the second. He had to make a decision.

"We don't have a choice!" Kaito shouted, stepping toward the wagon. "We destroy it now, or we die here!"

Seris nodded, her usual calm replaced by a grim determination. She unsheathed one of her daggers, the blade gleaming in the pale light of the artefact. "Stand back."

The rest of the party, still fending off the creatures, formed a defensive ring around the wagon as Seris knelt beside the chest. Kaito could see the strain in her movements, the effort it took to even be near the dark energy pouring from the relic. Whatever was inside, it wasn't just a trinket—it was something far more dangerous.

Seris raised her dagger, and for a split second, Kaito thought he saw the shadows around the chest move, as if the magic inside was aware of what was about to happen.

Then, with a swift, precise strike, Seris drove the dagger into the chest.

There was a sound like a thunderclap, and the air around them exploded with dark energy. Kaito was thrown back, his body slamming into the ground as the force of the blast rippled through the camp. For a moment, the world was nothing but darkness and the deafening roar of magic unravelling.

When Kaito's vision cleared, the camp was in chaos. The fire had been snuffed out by the explosion, leaving the camp in near darkness save for the faint, lingering glow from the shattered chest. The creatures had recoiled, their forms flickering as if caught in between worlds, their red eyes dimming.

Kaito struggled to his feet, his head spinning from the impact. "Seris!" he called out, his voice hoarse.

"I'm... fine," she replied, her voice strained as she emerged from the wreckage of the wagon. Her dagger was still embedded in the remains of the chest, but the artefact inside had been destroyed. Dark tendrils of energy swirled from the broken box, dissipating into the air like smoke from a dying fire.

The creatures that had been attacking them screeched in unison, their forms dissolving into shadows as the dark magic that had sustained them vanished. One by one, they disappeared, leaving nothing behind but an eerie silence.

Kaito collapsed against the side of a wagon, his body aching from the fight. The others were similarly exhausted, their weapons slick with dark blood, their expressions grim.

"It's over," Sylvara said, lowering her bow. "For now."

Borin wiped sweat from his brow, his hammer still clutched tightly in his hand. "That was too close. Much longer, and we would've been overwhelmed."

Grushak grunted, pulling his axe from the ground where he had buried it in one of the creatures. "This is what happens when you haul cursed artefacts through Valkra. Should've left that thing in the ruins where it belongs."

The merchant, who had been cowering behind one of the wagons during the attack, approached cautiously, his face pale. "You... you saved us."

Kaito looked at him, still trying to catch his breath. "We won't be able to protect you like this again. Whatever that thing was, it's gone now. But if you're going to make it to Redwater, you'll need to move fast."

The merchant nodded, his face filled with a mix of relief and fear. "We'll pack up and leave at first light. Thank you. I don't know what we would have done without you."

Seris, still recovering from the effects of the dark magic, straightened herself, brushing off the dirt from her cloak. "You'd better hurry. That explosion probably didn't go unnoticed."

Kaito stood, his legs shaky but holding steady. "Let's get some rest. We'll move out at dawn."

The next morning, Kaito's party watched as the merchant caravan disappeared into the mist, heading toward Redwater with renewed speed. The night had been long, and though they had survived, the encounter with the dark creatures and the cursed artefact had left them shaken. The magic in Valkra was growing stronger, and with every step they took, the dangers multiplied.

As they continued their journey toward the temple, the landscape became more desolate. The trees were sparser now, the land scarred by old battles and forgotten ruins. The air was colder, and the ever-present fog made it hard to see more than a few feet ahead. Yet, the group pressed on, determined to reach their destination before the warlords.

Over the next several days, they encountered more signs of trouble. A village they passed through had been abandoned, its buildings crumbling and overrun with twisted roots. In the distance, they saw the remnants of warband camps, their fires long extinguished, but the signs of recent conflict were unmistakable.

And yet, despite the grimness of the journey, they found moments of respite.

One afternoon, as they passed through a rocky valley, they came across a group of wandering monks from the northern mountains. The monks offered them food and water, and in exchange, Kaito's party agreed to escort them to the edge of the valley, where they would be safe from the roaming warbands. The monks told stories of the old gods, of the

ancient wars that had once torn Valkra apart, and though their tales were grim, there was a strange comfort in their wisdom.

"We have seen the signs," one of the elder monks had said to Kaito as they walked. "The winds carry whispers of an old power stirring in the earth. You are walking into the heart of that power, young one. Be mindful of the choices you make."

Kaito thanked them for their advice, though the weight of their words lingered in his mind long after they had parted ways.

Several days later, as they neared the northern edge of Valkra, they took shelter in a small outpost known as Iron Hollow. The outpost was little more than a collection of sturdy stone buildings built into the side of a mountain, but it served as a refuge for travellers and mercenaries making their way through the treacherous lands.

The outpost's leader, a grizzled man named Rynn, welcomed them with a wary eye. "Not many come this way unless they're heading for trouble," he said, his voice gruff as he led them inside.

"We're heading for the temple," Kaito replied, his tone measured. "We need information."

Rynn's expression darkened. "The temple, huh? You're not the first to come through here asking about it. Most don't come back."

Grushak leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. "We're not like most."

Rynn chuckled darkly. "No, I suppose you're not. I'll tell you what I know, but it won't make your journey any easier."

As they sat around a fire in the outpost's main hall, Rynn told them of the warlords' movements. He had heard reports of several warbands converging on the temple, their leaders obsessed with the ancient power hidden within. The temple itself was a fortress—an old ruin built into the mountains, protected by dark magic and the remnants of the ancient guardians who had once watched over it.

"It's not just the warlords you have to worry about," Rynn warned. "The temple has its own defences. Traps, illusions, and worse things than the creatures you've faced."

Kaito listened carefully, his mind already turning over the information. They were getting closer, but the dangers were growing more numerous. The temple was no ordinary ruin—it was a vault of ancient power, and the price for reaching it would be steep.

As the fire crackled in the hearth, Kaito felt the weight of his task pressing down on him once more. They were nearing the final stretch of their journey, but the hardest trials were still ahead.

Whatever awaits us at the temple, Kaito thought, we'll face it together.

But deep down, he couldn't shake the feeling that the choices he made in the coming days would determine the fate of more than just his companions. The ancient power within the temple had the potential to change the course of the world itself.

20

Shadows of Doubt

The warmth of the fire crackled in the heart of Iron Hollow, casting flickering shadows across the stone walls. Kaito sat at the table, staring into the flames, his thoughts heavy with the weight of their journey. They were so close now—closer to the temple and the ancient power that lay within. But as the reality of what they were facing set in, an unsettling feeling gnawed at the back of his mind.

Something was off.

The warning from the monks in the valley replayed in his head: Be mindful of the choices you make. The road ahead was fraught with danger, but there was something else, something lurking just beneath the surface—something that made Kaito's skin crawl.

His eyes drifted over the rest of the group, who sat scattered around the room. Grushak was sharpening his axe, his face a mask of quiet determination. Borin and Sylvara spoke in low voices near the corner, and Seris, ever the observer, sat by the window, watching the wind howl outside. Dorian was by himself, leaning against the far wall, his face hidden in the shadows.

Kaito's mind kept returning to the same thought, over and over—what if not everyone in his group had the same goal in mind? They were a strange collection of individuals, brought together by circumstance and mutual need, but that didn't mean they were bound by loyalty. He knew he could trust some of them—Grushak had proven himself over and over, and Borin's gruffness hid a core of iron loyalty. Sylvara had never once hesitated to protect the group, and Seris, for all her secrets, had always been clear in her motives.

But Dorian... Kaito wasn't sure about him. He had joined them under mysterious circumstances, claiming to have knowledge of the warlords and their movements. He was skilled, no doubt about that, but he was also a man who kept his true thoughts locked behind a wall of silence. And lately, Kaito had noticed him withdrawing even more, lingering at the edges of their group, watching, waiting.

Could Dorian betray us?

The thought sent a chill through Kaito's veins, but it was one he couldn't shake. Dorian had always been an enigma, but recently, there had been small, telling signs. His gaze lingered on the artefact they had encountered in the caravan, and when they had fought the creatures in the woods, he had seemed almost too calm. As if he had known what was coming.

Kaito clenched his jaw, trying to dismiss the creeping paranoia. This wasn't the time for second-guessing his allies. Not now. Not when they were on the verge of something so important.

"Something on your mind?" Seris's voice broke through his thoughts, pulling him back to the present.

Kaito looked up to see the Tiefling standing next to him, her golden eyes sharp as always. She leaned against the table, one hand casually resting on the hilt of her dagger, her gaze flicking between Kaito and the rest of the group.

"I'm fine," Kaito replied, though his tone was distant.

Seris tilted her head, studying him carefully. "You don't look fine. You've been staring into the fire for the last hour."

Kaito sighed, rubbing a hand across his face. "It's nothing. Just thinking about what's ahead."

Seris raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. "We're all thinking about that. But something else is bothering you. You're worried about Dorian, aren't you?"

Kaito's eyes widened in surprise. "How did you—?"

Seris smiled faintly, though it didn't reach her eyes. "You're not the only one who's noticed him pulling back. I've been watching him too."

Kaito leaned in, lowering his voice. "Do you think he's planning something? I mean, he's been helpful, but I can't shake the feeling that he's hiding something."

Seris was quiet for a moment, her eyes narrowing as she glanced in Dorian's direction. "Dorian's always been a man with secrets. That's just who he is. But you're right to be cautious. He's not like the rest of us—he has his own agenda."

Kaito frowned, his stomach churning with unease. "But what is his agenda? Why would he stick with us this long if he was planning to betray us?"

Seris shrugged, her expression cold. "Everyone's got their reasons. Maybe he thinks we're his best chance of reaching the temple. Or maybe he's waiting for the right moment to turn on us. Either way, I'll keep an eye on him."

Kaito felt a weight lift slightly from his chest, though the concern lingered. "Thanks, Seris."

"Don't thank me yet," she replied with a smirk. "If he tries anything, you'll be the first to know."

Seris returned to her place by the window, leaving Kaito to his thoughts. But now, at least, he wasn't alone in his suspicions. Seris was sharp—sharper than anyone else in the group when it came to reading people. If she was keeping an eye on

Dorian, then they had a chance to stop any betrayal before it happened.

Later that night, as the group settled down to rest, the wind outside picked up, howling through the narrow streets of Iron Hollow. Kaito lay on his bedroll, staring up at the stone ceiling, the unease still gnawing at him. His mind kept turning over the possibilities, trying to prepare for every eventuality. He knew he couldn't trust Dorian completely, but he couldn't afford to confront him yet—not without proof.

He needed to stay vigilant.

Suddenly, a soft sound broke the silence of the room. Footsteps—quiet, but unmistakable.

Kaito's eyes snapped open, his instincts kicking in. He sat up slowly, scanning the room. The others were asleep, their breathing slow and steady. But Dorian's bedroll was empty.

Without making a sound, Kaito rose to his feet, his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger. He slipped out of the room and into the narrow hallway, his senses sharp. The footsteps had been faint, but he could still hear them, echoing down the corridor toward the back of the outpost.

He moved quickly, keeping to the shadows, his heart pounding in his chest. As he rounded the corner, he spotted Dorian at the end of the hall, his form barely visible in the dim light. He was standing by a window, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword as he spoke to someone just outside the building.

Kaito's breath caught in his throat. Who is he talking to?

He inched closer, pressing himself against the wall as he strained to hear the conversation. Dorian's voice was low, but Kaito caught a few words—enough to make his blood run cold.

“...no, I’m still with them. We’ll reach the temple soon, but I’ll need more time. The artefact... it’s more dangerous than we thought.”

Kaito’s heart raced. Dorian is working with someone else.

He listened more closely, but before he could catch the rest of the conversation, Dorian suddenly stiffened, his head snapping around as if sensing Kaito’s presence. Their eyes met, and for a brief moment, there was a flicker of something dangerous in Dorian’s gaze.

Kaito tensed, readying himself for whatever would come next. But Dorian didn’t move. Instead, he slowly stepped back from the window, his face slipping into its usual unreadable mask.

“You’re up late,” Dorian said, his voice calm, though there was an edge to it.

Kaito forced himself to relax, though his heart was still pounding. “Couldn’t sleep. I heard you talking.”

Dorian raised an eyebrow, his expression cool. “I was just checking on our supplies. The guards outside the outpost are restless.”

Kaito’s eyes narrowed. “Is that so?”

Dorian’s smile was faint, but there was no warmth in it. “Of course. We’re walking into dangerous territory. Everyone’s on edge.”

Kaito didn’t respond, his mind racing. He couldn’t confront Dorian directly—not yet. He needed more proof. But one thing was clear: Dorian was hiding something, and whatever it was, it could jeopardise their entire mission.

“I’m heading back to bed,” Kaito said, his voice even. “You should do the same. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

Dorian nodded, his smile fading as he turned back toward the hallway. "I'll be right behind you."

As Kaito walked back to the others, his mind was spinning. He had no idea who Dorian was working with or what his true intentions were, but one thing was certain: betrayal was no longer a distant possibility. It was right here, in the heart of their group.

And if Kaito wasn't careful, it could tear them apart before they ever reached the temple.

As Kaito settled back into his bedroll, he glanced around at his companions, his heart heavy with the knowledge of what he had overheard. He could only hope that when the time came, he would be ready to face whatever darkness lay ahead.

But for now, all he could do was wait.

And watch.

21

The True Betrayer

Morning light streamed through the narrow windows of Iron Hollow, spilling golden rays across the wooden floor. Kaito stirred from his restless sleep, the memories of last night's revelations fresh in his mind. He rolled over, trying to shake off the lingering unease, but the sense of foreboding clung to him like a damp cloak.

As he pulled himself up, he spotted Dorian sitting at the table in the common area, studying a map spread out before him. The tension from the previous night still lingered in Kaito's chest, but he steeled himself as he approached.

"Morning," Kaito said, forcing a casual tone as he took a seat across from Dorian. "Did you sleep well?"

Dorian looked up, his expression inscrutable. "Better than I expected, given the circumstances." He traced a finger along the map, as if lost in thought. "We'll need to decide our next move soon. The sooner we reach the temple, the better."

"Right," Kaito replied, glancing at the map. They had marked their route toward the temple, but Kaito's mind was still on last night's conversation. "Did you—"

Before he could finish, Borin and Sylvara entered the room, their eyes bleary from sleep but brightening at the sight of breakfast being prepared.

"What's the plan for today?" Borin asked, rubbing his eyes as he poured himself a mug of ale. "Are we finally heading out?"

"Soon," Dorian replied, folding the map and tucking it away. "We have some business to attend to first."

Kaito felt a surge of frustration as he realised Dorian was still evading the questions lingering in the air. He opened his mouth to challenge him further, but Grushak entered the room, his boisterous laughter echoing against the walls.

“Good morning, friends! Who’s ready for adventure?” Grushak boomed, the big orc’s enthusiasm infectious. His spirit lifted Kaito’s mood, if only slightly.

As breakfast was prepared, Kaito sat silently, mulling over the growing rift within their group. He caught Seris’s eye across the room, and the way she smirked at him sent an uneasy shiver down his spine. She was too confident, too self-assured, and in that moment, Kaito couldn’t shake the feeling that she was hiding something.

After breakfast, Kaito found himself in the courtyard, watching as the others gathered supplies for their journey. Dorian was directing Grushak and Borin as they loaded up their packs, while Sylvara stood nearby, polishing her bow. Kaito hesitated, torn between confronting Dorian about his suspicions and the nagging doubt that maybe it was Seris he should be wary of instead.

“Hey, Kaito,” Sylvara called, breaking his train of thought. “You’re awfully quiet today. Everything alright?”

“Yeah, just...thinking,” he replied, forcing a smile.

As the others packed up, Kaito caught a glimpse of Seris, who had slipped away from the group, moving toward the edge of the courtyard. Her demeanour was different, and instinctively, Kaito felt a pull of concern.

“I’ll be right back,” he said to Sylvara, before striding toward Seris. “Hey, where are you going?”

Seris glanced back, her expression shifting from surprise to a cool smile. "Just checking on something. You shouldn't worry about me."

"Worry?" Kaito pressed, his tone firm. "You're acting strange, and after everything that's happened, I have a reason to be concerned."

She laughed lightly, but it was empty. "You're starting to sound like Dorian. We're all friends here, aren't we?"

Kaito narrowed his eyes. "That's just it. I'm starting to wonder who I can trust."

"Trust is a tricky thing, Kaito," she replied, her smile fading. "Especially in a world like this."

With that, she turned, moving further into the shadows of the courtyard. Kaito's instincts flared, and he followed her, heart racing as he sensed something darker lurking beneath the surface of her casual demeanour.

Just as he was about to call out to her again, he heard a familiar voice—Dorian's—ringing through the air.

"Kaito! Get over here!"

Kaito hesitated, torn between the urge to confront Seris and the call of Dorian. Reluctantly, he turned back to join the group, but the unease persisted, twisting in his gut like a coiled serpent.

As he reached the others, Dorian had a serious expression on his face. "We've got a problem. The town guard reported some strange activity on the outskirts of Iron Hollow. It sounds like a group of mercenaries has been spotted. We should investigate before we leave."

"Mercenaries?" Kaito echoed, his heart sinking. "What do they want?"

"Good question," Dorian replied, his eyes scanning the horizon. "But it's not a coincidence that they appeared just as we're about to leave. We need to be careful. I have a feeling they're not here for a friendly chat."

"Let's go check it out," Grushak suggested, his eagerness palpable. "I'm ready for a fight!"

Kaito nodded, his resolve strengthening. This could be the chance to gather information—about Dorian, about Seris, and about whatever dark intentions lay behind their quest. As the group set out, Kaito felt a mixture of dread and anticipation brewing inside him.

They moved through the twisting streets of Iron Hollow, their boots echoing against the cobblestones. Kaito kept his eyes peeled for any signs of the mercenaries, his instincts honed and alert.

As they approached the edge of town, a sense of foreboding hung in the air. The trees loomed overhead, their branches swaying gently in the wind, casting long shadows across the ground. They paused at the tree line, and Dorian motioned for silence, his expression serious.

"Stay close. We don't know what we're dealing with," he instructed.

The group crept forward, hearts pounding in unison. Kaito scanned the area, a tingle of anxiety prickling at the back of his neck. They moved deeper into the woods, where the trees thickened and the sounds of the town faded away.

Suddenly, the rustle of leaves broke the stillness, and Kaito's heart raced as a group of figures emerged from the underbrush—five men clad in dark leather armour, their eyes

glinting with malicious intent. They looked like mercenaries, their weapons drawn, and the moment hung heavy with tension.

"What do you want?" Dorian called out, stepping forward as Grushak readied his axe.

The mercenary at the front, a tall man with a jagged scar across his cheek, stepped forward. "We're looking for something. Someone, actually. A traitor."

Kaito's stomach dropped as he recognized the words. A traitor. The echoes of their conversation danced in his mind, and suddenly it hit him.

"Who are you talking about?" Kaito demanded, stepping closer.

"Seris," the scarred man sneered. "She's been feeding information to the enemies of the Crown. We've been tracking her for weeks."

The air thickened with tension as Kaito's heart raced. Seris a traitor? It couldn't be. She had been a part of their group, helping them every step of the way. But as the mercenaries closed in, doubt gnawed at him.

"She's not here!" Dorian exclaimed, his voice sharp. "You've got the wrong person."

"Do we?" the mercenary challenged, eyes glinting dangerously. "We have our orders. If she's with you, we have no choice but to bring you all in."

Kaito glanced back at the group, a mix of uncertainty and anger boiling within him. The world around him felt like it was spiralling into chaos. The truth of Seris's allegiance could shatter everything they had built, everything they had fought for.

Before he could say anything else, a flash of movement caught his eye. Seris emerged from the trees, her figure lithe and shadowy against the sunlight. She had a dagger in each hand, a fierce look in her eyes.

"Step away from them!" she shouted, her voice steady, commanding. "This is between me and you."

The mercenaries looked at one another, confusion breaking through their menacing facade. "You're the traitor," the scarred man sneered, his grip tightening on his weapon. "We've been sent to take you down."

Seris's gaze flicked between the mercenaries and her companions, the weight of the situation heavy on her shoulders. "You don't understand," she said, her voice laced with tension. "I'm not your enemy."

"Enough games!" the leader roared. "You'll come with us, or we'll take you by force!"

Kaito stepped forward, unable to contain himself any longer. "Wait!" he shouted, his voice ringing through the clearing. "We need to know what's going on. Why do you think she's a traitor?"

The mercenary's eyes narrowed, a predatory gleam flashing through them. "She's been passing information about your group to the warlords. You're nothing but pawns in a game you don't understand."

"Is that true?" Kaito demanded, turning to Seris, desperation creeping into his voice. "Have you been working with them?"

Seris stood her ground, her expression unwavering. "No. They're lying."

22

The Truth Revealed

The air between Kaito and Seris crackled with tension, their eyes locked in a battle of trust and betrayal. Around them, the mercenaries tightened their grip on their weapons, ready to strike at any moment. Kaito's heart pounded in his chest, a flood of emotions surging through him—confusion, anger, and above all, doubt.

Seris had been with them for so long. She had fought beside them, saved their lives more than once. But the accusation from the mercenaries was too pointed, too direct to ignore.

"I've been gathering information," Seris repeated, her golden eyes flicking between Kaito and the mercenaries. "But not for the warlords. I've been tracking their movements, trying to stay one step ahead of them. The reason these mercenaries are after me is because I've been feeding information to a resistance—people trying to stop the warlords from gaining too much power."

The leader of the mercenaries sneered, stepping closer. "You expect them to believe that? You've been playing both sides, Seris. We know about your contacts with the warlords. You're working for yourself, nothing more."

Kaito's head spun as he tried to make sense of it all. His instincts told him that Seris was dangerous, but there had never been hard proof. And now, with this confrontation, he was being forced to make a decision—one that could shatter their fragile alliance.

Before Kaito could speak, Dorian stepped forward, his expression cold but calm. "They're right, Kaito," he said, his voice steady. "I've been watching Seris for a while now. She's been in contact with more than just the resistance. She's been

meeting with warlords and mercenaries alike, selling information to the highest bidder.”

Kaito’s heart sank. Dorian knew all along?

Seris’s face hardened, her hands tightening on her daggers. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Dorian. You’ve been trailing me, snooping around like some self-righteous spy, but you don’t know everything.”

“Don’t I?” Dorian shot back, his voice cutting through the air like a blade. “I’ve been hunting you for weeks. I joined this group because I knew it would bring me closer to you, closer to the truth. You’ve been manipulating us this entire time—feeding us just enough to keep us going, while sending information to the warlords.”

Grushak’s eyes flicked between them, his expression dark. “Is this true, Seris? Have you been playing us for fools?”

Seris didn’t flinch. “I did what I had to. You don’t know what kind of power we’re dealing with. If the warlords get their hands on what’s inside the temple, everything changes. I’ve been gathering intel, yes—but it’s because I need to stop them. We can’t let them get to that power. That’s why I’ve been working with the resistance.”

“You mean selling information to both sides,” Dorian interrupted, his voice laced with accusation. “You’re trying to profit off this chaos, Seris. Admit it.”

Seris’s eyes burned with anger, but she didn’t deny it outright. Instead, she glared at Dorian. “You think you know everything, don’t you? You and your misguided quest for justice.”

Dorian’s face darkened, and for the first time, Kaito saw the raw anger and bitterness that had been simmering beneath the surface. “I’m not after justice, Seris. I’m after the truth. And the truth is that you’ve been playing all of us. You’re no hero.”

The tension in the air was thick enough to cut. The mercenaries stood ready to act, their eyes darting between Seris and the group. Kaito felt the weight of the decision pressing down on him—he had to choose where to place his trust.

Seris looked at Kaito, her expression hardening but with a flicker of desperation in her eyes. “Kaito, listen to me. Everything I’ve done has been to stop the warlords. I know I haven’t been honest with you, but that doesn’t mean I’m working against you. You need me. I know things that can help us win.”

Kaito felt the others watching him, waiting for his decision. Sylvara’s eyes were narrowed in suspicion, Borin’s hands rested on the hilt of his hammer, and Grushak’s face was unreadable. The weight of leadership was pressing down on him, heavier than it had ever been before.

“I don’t know if I can trust you,” Kaito said finally, his voice steady but filled with doubt. “You’ve lied to us. You’ve kept things from us. How do I know you’re not still working against us?”

Seris’s face softened, just for a moment. “I’m not your enemy, Kaito. I may have made deals with unsavoury people to get the information we need, but my goal is the same as yours: stopping the warlords from gaining control of the temple. If we don’t work together, none of us will survive what’s coming.”

The leader of the mercenaries stepped forward, his sword raised. “Enough talk. Seris comes with us, whether you agree or not. Hand her over, or we’ll take her by force.”

Grushak growled, stepping forward. “You won’t be taking anyone unless we say so.”

The tension snapped. The mercenaries lunged forward, weapons drawn, and the clearing erupted into chaos.

Kaito drew his dagger, his mind spinning as he tried to keep up with the sudden battle. Grushak was already in the thick of it, his axe swinging in wide arcs as he cut down the nearest mercenary. Sylvara's arrows flew through the air, each one finding its mark with deadly precision. Borin charged in with a roar, his hammer smashing into one of the attackers with bone-crushing force.

Dorian and Seris, however, stood back, circling each other like predators waiting for the right moment to strike. Their eyes locked, and Kaito could feel the weight of their shared history, the betrayal and anger simmering between them.

"You won't get away with this," Dorian growled, his sword flashing in the light as he advanced on Seris.

Seris deflected his strike with her daggers, her movements quick and precise. "You don't know what you're dealing with, Dorian. You think this is about justice, but it's so much bigger than that."

Their blades clashed again, sparks flying as they fought. Kaito could see the bitterness in their strikes, the fury in their eyes. It wasn't just about the mission anymore—it was personal.

Kaito felt a rush of frustration. He couldn't let this tear them apart, not when they were so close to the temple and the threat of the warlords was looming larger than ever. With a surge of determination, he darted between them, raising his hands to separate the two combatants.

"Stop!" Kaito shouted, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Both of you, stop!"

Dorian hesitated, his sword still raised, his chest heaving from the effort of the fight. Seris took a step back, her daggers lowered, her expression wary but not defeated.

Kaito glared at them both. "This is insane. We can't afford to fight each other right now. The warlords are closing in on the temple, and if we waste time fighting amongst ourselves, we'll lose everything."

Dorian wiped blood from a cut on his cheek, his eyes still burning with anger. "She's dangerous, Kaito. You know that."

"And I know you've been hiding things too, Dorian," Kaito shot back, his voice firm. "I overheard you last night. You've been tracking Seris for weeks, but you never told us. Why?"

Dorian stiffened, his jaw tightening. "Because I didn't want to risk tipping her off. I needed to be sure before I acted."

Kaito's gaze shifted to Seris, whose eyes were narrowed in frustration. "And you've been lying to us from the start. But you say you're trying to stop the warlords."

"I am," Seris insisted, her voice steady but laced with desperation. "Everything I've done has been to get us closer to stopping them."

Kaito took a deep breath, his mind racing as he tried to piece together the truth. Both Seris and Dorian had kept secrets, and both had their own agendas. But the warlords were still out there, still moving closer to the temple, and that was the real threat.

He turned to the mercenaries, who had been defeated, their leader barely standing. "Take your men and leave," Kaito said, his voice hard. "We're not handing Seris over to you."

The mercenary leader glared at him, but with his forces scattered, he had no choice but to retreat. "You're making a mistake," he spat. "She'll betray you."

With that, the mercenaries disappeared into the woods, leaving the clearing eerily quiet.

Kaito turned back to Seris and Dorian, his decision made. "We keep moving. Seris, you stay with us—for now. But I'll be watching you. If you do anything to jeopardise this mission, you're done. Do you understand?"

Seris nodded, her expression guarded but relieved. "I understand."

"And Dorian," Kaito added, turning to him. "No more secrets. If you know something, you tell us. We're all on the same side here."

23

Fractured Loyalties

The aftermath of the skirmish left the clearing deathly silent. The mercenaries were gone, their threat echoing in the minds of everyone in the group, but the damage had already been done. Kaito stood between Seris and Dorian, his body tense and his mind spinning with the weight of his decision. Both of them were dangerous—both of them had kept secrets. Trust had become a fragile thing, and the cracks were starting to show.

Grushak grunted, dragging his axe through the dirt as he scanned the clearing. “We should move out. We’ve wasted enough time on this mess.”

Kaito nodded, though his thoughts were still tangled. “Agreed. The longer we stay here, the closer the warlords get to the temple.”

Borin, wiping sweat from his brow, stepped up beside Kaito. “Are we sure about this? Keeping her with us?” He shot a suspicious glance at Seris, who was still standing, her daggers sheathed but her body tense, as if ready to defend herself at any moment. “What if she really is working with the warlords? We can’t afford to be stabbed in the back this close to the end.”

Sylvara, quiet as ever, chimed in, her voice steady. “We can’t trust either of them completely. Not after everything that’s happened. But Kaito’s right—if we don’t keep moving, the warlords will reach the temple before we do, and all of this will be for nothing.”

Dorian, who had been cleaning his sword with quick, sharp movements, looked up. His eyes were cold, calculating. “The

mission is more important than any of us. You know that, Kaito. If Seris steps out of line, I'll deal with her myself."

Seris scoffed, folding her arms as she gave Dorian a hard stare. "You're all so quick to blame me. Yes, I've kept things from you—but I'm not the one who's been trailing behind the group, sneaking off at night." Her golden eyes flicked toward Kaito. "Maybe we should be questioning Dorian's loyalty."

Kaito shook his head, trying to stop the argument before it spiraled out of control. "Enough. We can't afford to fall apart now. We're in this together, whether we like it or not. From this point on, we're heading to the temple, and we deal with the warlords. No more lies. No more secrets."

Grushak grunted in approval, his axe resting heavily on his shoulder. "If anyone tries anything, I'll handle it."

With that, the group gathered their gear, the tension still thick in the air but pushed aside by necessity. They couldn't let their internal conflict slow them down any longer. The warlords were moving, and every minute spent arguing was a minute closer to disaster.

They travelled in silence for the rest of the day, the dark, twisted forest of Valkra stretching out endlessly before them. The trees loomed like skeletal sentinels, their branches tangled in gnarled shapes, casting long shadows across the uneven ground. The path was narrow and treacherous, and every step felt like it was leading them deeper into the unknown.

Kaito kept his eyes on the horizon, but his mind was elsewhere. He had tried to reconcile his feelings about Seris and Dorian, but the gnawing suspicion remained. Seris had been with them for so long, helping them in critical moments, yet she had lied about her dealings with the warlords. And Dorian—despite his insistence that he was here to help—had kept his own mission hidden for just as long.

Kaito knew they were both dangerous. But he also knew he couldn't afford to alienate either of them, not when they were so close to the temple. He had to keep the group together—at least until they reached their destination.

The forest thickened as they moved deeper, the trees pressing in on them like a wall of darkness. The air grew colder, and a heavy mist rolled in, making it difficult to see more than a few feet ahead. The atmosphere was oppressive, the magic in the land palpable, humming with an energy that felt ancient and dangerous.

"This place is cursed," Borin muttered under his breath, his eyes darting around warily. "I can feel it."

Grushak grunted in agreement. "Feels like something's watching us. Stay sharp."

The group pressed on, moving cautiously through the mist. Every rustle of leaves, every snap of a twig set their nerves on edge. Kaito's hand hovered near the hilt of his dagger, ready for whatever might come out of the darkness.

Suddenly, a faint sound broke the silence—a distant, rhythmic thudding, like the steady beat of drums.

Kaito stopped in his tracks, his heart skipping a beat. "Do you hear that?"

The others halted as well, listening intently. The drumming grew louder, more insistent, echoing through the mist like a heartbeat.

Sylvara's eyes narrowed as she scanned the horizon. "It's coming from up ahead."

"Warlords?" Borin asked, his grip tightening on his hammer.

"Possibly," Seris replied, her voice low. "Or something worse."

Without another word, they pressed forward, following the sound of the drums. The mist thickened around them, the air growing colder with each passing minute. Kaito's breath misted in front of him, his senses on high alert.

As they crested a small rise, the source of the sound came into view.

A massive camp sprawled across the valley below them, lit by the flickering glow of hundreds of fires. Dark banners waved in the cold wind, and the rhythmic pounding of drums reverberated through the air. Warlords' forces, numbering in the hundreds, had gathered in the valley, their armour glinting in the firelight. It was a war camp—an army preparing for battle.

Kaito's stomach sank. "They're already here."

Dorian stepped forward, his face grim. "They're preparing for the final push. The temple is close. They'll move on it soon."

Grushak cursed under his breath. "There's too many of them. We can't fight our way through that."

"We don't need to," Seris said quietly. "Not yet. The temple is still ahead. If we can reach it first, we may have a chance to stop them from gaining control of the power inside."

"And how do you suggest we get through without them noticing?" Borin asked, his voice dripping with scepticism.

Seris glanced at the camp, her eyes narrowing. "There's an old path that runs parallel to the valley, hidden by the cliffs. It's dangerous, but it will take us around the war camp and lead us directly to the temple."

Dorian frowned, clearly sceptical of Seris's suggestion. "And how do you know about this path?"

"I've scouted this area before," Seris replied, her voice firm. "I know the way."

Kaito's mind raced. The path could be their only chance to avoid a direct confrontation with the warlords' army, but it was also risky. If Seris was lying, or if the path was more dangerous than she let on, they could all be walking into a trap.

But what choice did they have?

Kaito looked at the others, his decision already forming in his mind. "We take the path. It's our only chance of reaching the temple before the warlords do."

Dorian opened his mouth to object, but Grushak cut him off with a growl. "Kaito's right. We don't have time to debate this."

The group nodded, though the tension between Seris and Dorian remained thick in the air. Kaito knew that distrust simmered just beneath the surface, but for now, it didn't matter. They had a mission to complete, and they couldn't afford to waste any more time.

Seris led them toward the cliffs, the mist swirling around them as they made their way along the narrow path. The drums from the war camp continued to beat in the distance, a reminder of the danger that lurked just below.

Kaito's heart pounded in his chest as they walked, the cold air stinging his face. They were so close now—so close to the temple and the ancient power hidden within. But the closer they got, the more he felt the weight of the choices he had made. The cracks in their group were growing deeper, and he knew that it was only a matter of time before those cracks shattered.

I just need to hold it together long enough, Kaito thought, his eyes fixed on the path ahead. Just long enough to reach the temple.

But as the mist thickened and the shadows deepened, Kaito couldn't shake the feeling that the true danger wasn't in the war camp below—it was walking right beside him.

24

Into the Depths

The mist was thick enough to choke on, clinging to their skin and curling through their hair as the group edged along the hidden path Seris had mentioned. It wound through the jagged cliffs, treacherous and narrow, with a sheer drop on one side that plunged into the shadowy valley below. Kaito could hear the faint sounds of the warlord's army, the rhythmic pounding of drums and the distant clatter of armour and weapons as they prepared for their assault on the temple.

Each step felt heavier than the last. Kaito knew they were walking a razor's edge—one wrong move, and they'd fall into either the warlords' trap or a more literal one in the form of a sheer drop. The narrow, rocky ledge beneath their feet was slick with moisture, and the occasional loose stone rattled down into the abyss below. Every time they lost their footing, Kaito's heart lurched, as if they were one mistake away from plunging into oblivion.

As Seris led the way, her steps light and sure, Kaito couldn't help but replay the events of the last few days in his mind. His trust in her was hanging by a thread, and Dorian's relentless pursuit of exposing her as a traitor had only deepened the tension between them. Now, with the warlords' army just below and the fate of the temple hanging in the balance, Kaito had to make sure he wasn't being led into a trap.

"Keep your eyes ahead," Dorian muttered, his voice low but strained. He was walking just behind Seris, his hand never straying far from his sword. Kaito could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes darted from side to side, searching for any sign of betrayal.

Grushak grumbled from the back of the group. "If this path gets any narrower, we'll have to crawl our way to the temple."

"We're almost there," Seris said quietly, though her voice was as steady as ever. "The entrance to the temple should be just ahead, hidden in the cliffs. If we reach it before the warlords' scouts, we'll have a chance to seal the power inside before they can take control of it."

Sylvara, who had been walking near the rear, spoke up. "And if we don't?"

"Then we fight," Seris answered, glancing back at Kaito. Her eyes held his for a moment, filled with something that almost looked like trust—though it was hard to tell whether she was genuine or simply playing her part. "We can't let them take what's in that temple. Not if we want to save this world."

Kaito's stomach twisted. He had come to this world as a high school kid, unsure of his place and thrown into an orc's body. His journey had been full of uncertainty, danger, and choices he hadn't wanted to make. Now, he stood at the precipice of something far greater—an ancient power that had the potential to reshape the world, for good or for ill.

If the warlords got to it first, there would be no turning back.

The group pressed forward, moving cautiously along the path. The mist swirled and parted in front of them, revealing a jagged stone outcropping that jutted out from the cliffside. Beyond it, partially hidden by overgrown vines and the weathered remains of an ancient archway, lay the entrance to the temple—a massive, dark opening carved into the mountainside.

Kaito stopped in his tracks, staring up at the entrance. The oppressive energy that had been building since they entered Valkra hit him full force, and the light inside him—the same divine spark that had saved them before—flickered

uncomfortably, as if recoiling from the dark power radiating from the temple.

"We're here," Seris said, her voice low and urgent. "But we need to move fast. The warlords' scouts could be right behind us."

Dorian was already scanning the area, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "We're exposed out here. Let's not waste any more time."

The group moved toward the entrance, but as they approached, a low rumbling sound echoed from within the temple. The ground beneath their feet trembled, and Kaito felt a sudden surge of dark energy pulse through the air.

"What was that?" Borin asked, gripping his hammer tightly.

Seris's face darkened. "It's starting. The temple's magic is awakening."

Kaito could feel it too—an ancient power stirring beneath the surface, waiting to be unleashed. His heart raced as he stepped closer to the entrance, his hand instinctively reaching for his dagger. The air around the temple crackled with dark magic, and every instinct in his body screamed at him to turn back, to flee before it was too late.

But he couldn't. Not now. Not after coming this far.

"Let's go," Kaito said, his voice steady despite the fear gnawing at him. "We need to get inside before the warlords do."

They moved as one, slipping through the archway and into the darkness of the temple. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of damp stone and old, decaying magic. The walls were lined with ancient runes, glowing faintly in the dim light, casting eerie shadows across the chamber.

"This place is a tomb," Sylvara whispered, her voice barely audible. "Whatever's in here has been sealed away for a reason."

Kaito nodded, his eyes scanning the walls. The runes seemed to pulse with an ancient energy, one that was both enticing and terrifying. He could feel the power calling to him, drawing him deeper into the temple. The light inside him flickered again, responding to the dark magic with a pulse of its own.

As they moved deeper into the temple, the air grew colder, and the sense of danger intensified. The walls began to close in, the passageways narrowing as they descended into the depths. Kaito could hear the faint echo of footsteps behind them—distant but growing closer.

"They're coming," Dorian muttered, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "We don't have much time."

Suddenly, the passage opened into a massive chamber, its ceiling lost in the shadows above. At the centre of the room stood a large, stone pedestal, upon which rested a glowing orb. The artefact radiated a pulsing, dark light, its energy filling the chamber with a palpable sense of dread.

"This is it," Seris whispered, her eyes locked on the orb. "The heart of the temple."

Kaito's pulse quickened as he approached the pedestal, the light inside him flickering with every step. The artefact called to him, its power overwhelming and seductive. He could feel the weight of it pressing down on him, a dark force that threatened to consume him if he got too close.

"This is the power the warlords want," Kaito said, his voice barely above a whisper. "If they get their hands on this..."

"They won't," Dorian said, stepping forward. "Not if we destroy it first."

But before anyone could react, the chamber trembled, and the entrance behind them sealed shut with a deafening crash. The dark magic in the air thickened, and the glowing runes on the walls flared to life.

"We're not alone," Sylvara said, her voice tense.

From the shadows, figures emerged—twisted creatures made of darkness and bone, their red eyes glowing with malevolent energy. They moved silently, their bodies shifting and writhing as they advanced on the group.

Kaito's heart pounded as he drew his dagger, the light inside him flaring in response to the darkness closing in around them. He could feel the power inside the temple—inside the artifact—reacting to the threat, as if it was awakening along with the creatures.

"This was a trap," Borin growled, readying his hammer. "They were waiting for us."

Seris stepped forward, her daggers drawn. "It's not just a trap. The temple is defending itself. It doesn't want anyone to take the power inside."

Kaito's mind raced as the creatures circled them, their eyes locked on the artefact. He had no idea how they were going to survive this, let alone stop the warlords from taking the power for themselves.

But there was no turning back now.

"Fight them off!" Kaito shouted, his voice echoing through the chamber. "We have to keep them away from the artefact!"

The battle erupted in chaos, the sound of steel clashing against bone and shadow filling the chamber. Grushak roared as he swung his axe, cutting through one of the creatures with

a brutal strike, while Sylvara's arrows flew through the air, each one finding its mark with deadly precision. Borin fought with a fury that belied his size, smashing through the attackers with his hammer.

But for every creature they cut down, more seemed to emerge from the shadows, their red eyes glowing with an unnatural hunger.

Kaito fought with everything he had, his dagger glowing with the divine light that had saved him so many times before. But the creatures were relentless, their attacks fast and brutal. He could feel the power of the artefact growing stronger with each passing moment, its dark energy threatening to overwhelm them.

"We need to do something!" Dorian shouted, slashing through one of the creatures. "We can't hold them off forever!"

Kaito's eyes flicked to the orb on the pedestal, its dark light pulsing in time with the creatures' attacks. The answer was right in front of them, but the price of touching that power... he didn't know if he could pay it.

Kaito, it's time to decide.

25

The Guardian Awakens

The battle in the chamber raged on, the flickering light of Kaito's glowing dagger casting long shadows against the ancient stone walls. The creatures—twisted amalgamations of darkness and bone—surrounded them, their red eyes burning with malevolent hunger. Yet, for all their savagery, Kaito and his companions were holding their ground.

Grushak's axe cleaved through another creature with a heavy thud, sending it crashing to the ground in a cloud of black smoke. Sylvara's arrows flew true, each one finding its mark in the creatures' glowing eyes, turning them to ash. Borin fought with the ferocity of a cornered beast, his hammer smashing through the dark figures, their forms crumbling under the force of his strikes.

Kaito's divine light flared with each swing of his dagger, burning through the darkness. Every time a creature lunged at him, the light within him surged, cutting through the dark magic that animated them. The light—his mysterious connection to something ancient and divine—was the key to keeping these creatures at bay.

"They're weakening!" Dorian shouted over the chaos, slashing through one of the creatures. "We can finish this!"

Kaito nodded, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He could feel it too—the tide of the battle was turning. The creatures, for all their numbers and ferocity, were slowing down, their movements becoming more erratic. They were faltering, as if the magic that bound them was losing strength.

"We've got them!" Borin roared, his hammer crashing into the last of the creatures near him, sending it flying into the wall with a satisfying crunch.

Grushak let out a victorious snarl as he swung his axe in a wide arc, cutting down two more of the creatures with brutal efficiency. The number of enemies was dwindling, their twisted forms dissolving into nothingness as the group pushed forward.

For a brief, shining moment, it seemed like they were winning. The creatures were falling back, their numbers thinning as Kaito and his companions pressed the attack. The pulsing dark energy of the temple seemed to wane, as if even the magic within these ancient walls recognized their strength.

Kaito's heart pounded with hope. They were so close to victory—so close to reaching the artefact before the warlords could. The dark magic in the air was still oppressive, but the creatures were nearly defeated. He could see the end in sight.

But just as the last of the creatures began to fade into smoke, a deep, rumbling sound echoed through the chamber. The ground trembled beneath their feet, sending cracks spidering across the stone floor.

"What the—" Grushak started, his voice cut off by a violent shudder that nearly knocked him off his feet.

The rumbling grew louder, a low, guttural growl that reverberated through the stone walls. Kaito's heart sank as he realised the source of the sound wasn't the temple collapsing around them—it was something else, something far worse.

A dark shape began to rise from the depths of the chamber, coiling and shifting in the shadows. The temperature in the room plummeted, and a cold, primal fear took hold of Kaito as he watched the massive form emerge from the darkness.

Out of the shadowed recesses of the temple came a creature larger than anything Kaito had ever seen. It was a serpent—a giant snake—but not like any snake from the world he had once known. Its scales were dark and glistened like wet stone, each one the size of a man's shield. Its body coiled and uncoiled in the shadows, thick as a tree trunk, stretching impossibly long.

But it wasn't the serpent's size that struck the deepest fear into Kaito's heart—it was its heads. Multiple heads, each one snapping and snarling, their fanged maws dripping with dark venom. They glowed with an unnatural light, their eyes blazing red like the creatures they had just fought. And as it fully emerged, Kaito could see the temple runes on the walls glowing brighter, responding to the guardian's presence.

Seris's voice cut through the stunned silence. "It's the Guardian of the temple..."

Kaito's blood ran cold. The Guardian. This was no mere creature—it was a sentry, an ancient monster tasked with protecting the dark power sealed within the temple. And now, it was awake.

One of the serpent heads lunged toward them with terrifying speed, its fangs bared and dripping with venom. Kaito barely had time to throw himself to the side as the massive jaws snapped shut where he had been standing. The force of its strike sent shockwaves through the ground, knocking Grushak and Borin off balance.

"Move!" Sylvara shouted, notching an arrow and letting it fly. The arrow struck one of the serpent's heads in the eye, but the creature barely flinched, its thick scales and unnatural resilience shrugging off the blow.

Grushak roared as he swung his axe, trying to catch one of the heads as it darted toward him. His blade connected with a sickening crack, but the snake-like creature recoiled only for a

moment before another head lashed out, forcing Grushak to retreat.

"We can't fight this thing head-on!" Borin yelled, smashing his hammer into the ground to keep his balance as the serpent's massive tail swept through the chamber, knocking over ancient stone pillars.

Seris, her face set with grim determination, darted to the side, her daggers flashing in the dim light. "It's protecting the artefact! We need to draw it away from the pedestal!"

Kaito gritted his teeth, his heart racing as the serpent coiled tighter around the chamber. Its multiple heads struck at them from every angle, and it was all he could do to dodge and parry the relentless attacks. The divine light inside him flared, reacting to the overwhelming darkness of the Guardian, but it wasn't enough. The creature's sheer size and power were too much for him to face alone.

"Dorian!" Kaito shouted as he slashed at one of the heads that lunged at him. "We need to figure out how to stop this thing!"

Dorian, who had been forced into the shadows to avoid the serpent's strikes, looked up at the glowing runes on the walls. His face was pale but focused. "The runes! They're controlling the Guardian—keeping it tethered to the temple's magic! If we can disrupt them, we might be able to weaken it!"

Kaito's eyes darted to the walls, where the runes pulsed with an eerie light. The idea made sense—the Guardian wasn't just a physical protector. It was bound to the temple's magic, sustained by the same ancient force that protected the artefact.

"We need to break the runes!" Kaito shouted, dodging another strike from one of the serpent's heads. "Grushak, Borin, keep it busy! Dorian, Sylvara—find a way to disrupt the magic!"

Grushak grinned through the chaos, his axe gleaming as he launched himself at the serpent. "Keeping it busy is what I do best!"

Borin followed suit, his hammer swinging with brutal force as he struck at the serpent's thick scales, drawing its attention away from Kaito and Dorian.

Kaito sprinted toward the nearest wall, where the glowing runes pulsed in time with the Guardian's movements. He could feel the dark magic flowing through them, connecting the creature to the temple's power. If they could sever that connection, they might stand a chance.

Dorian was already at another set of runes, his sword slashing through the stone in a desperate attempt to disrupt the magic. "Hurry! We don't have much time!"

Sylvara loosed another arrow, this time aiming for one of the serpent's exposed eyes. The arrow struck true, and the creature let out an ear-splitting screech, thrashing wildly as it recoiled from the blow.

Kaito reached the runes and raised his dagger, the divine light within him flaring to life as he struck the stone. The runes cracked under the force of the blow, and the dark magic in the air pulsed violently as the connection between the Guardian and the temple began to weaken.

But it wasn't enough.

The Guardian roared, its massive body thrashing through the chamber as it tried to crush them beneath its weight. The temple itself trembled as the serpent's coils tightened, the stone groaning under the strain.

"Keep going!" Kaito shouted, slashing at another set of runes. "We need to weaken it more!"

Seris darted through the chaos, her daggers flashing as she cut through more runes on the far wall. "We can do this! Don't stop!"

But as Kaito raised his dagger for another strike, the Guardian reared back, all of its heads focusing on him with a terrifying, singular intensity. Its eyes burned with rage, and Kaito felt the full force of the temple's dark magic bearing down on him.

The Guardian lunged, its fangs bared, and Kaito knew he wouldn't be able to dodge in time.

26

The Fall of the Guardian

The Guardian's massive, snake-like body coiled tighter as its heads reared back, preparing to strike. Kaito's heart pounded in his chest as he saw the sheer size and speed of the creature. There was no time to think—no time to second-guess. It was going to strike, and when it did, it would be the end for all of them unless they acted fast.

"Now!" Kaito shouted, his voice echoing through the cavernous chamber. "Hit the runes again!"

Grushak swung his axe with a primal roar, burying the blade into the floor near the glowing symbols that had tethered the Guardian to the temple's magic. The dark runes flared, then sputtered, cracks splintering through them like broken glass. Borin slammed his hammer into another set of runes, the stone shattering under the force, sending a tremor through the ground.

Dorian and Seris moved in unison, slashing at the walls where more runes were etched, their blades disrupting the ancient magic that held the Guardian in place. The creature roared in pain, its body writhing as the magical connection that sustained it began to fray.

Kaito rushed toward the centre of the chamber, where the massive stone pedestal stood, still glowing faintly with the power of the artefact that the Guardian had been sworn to protect. The air around it crackled with dark energy, but Kaito's divine light flared brighter in response. He could feel the power of the temple and the creature weakening as more runes were destroyed.

With a final surge of determination, Kaito raised his dagger high and brought it down with all his strength into the last glowing rune near the pedestal. The blade, glowing with the divine light inside him, connected with the dark magic in the stone, and for a brief moment, there was silence.

Then, the chamber exploded with light.

The Guardian screeched, its multiple heads thrashing wildly as the dark energy holding it together was ripped apart. The runes along the walls flickered and died, their power extinguished. The creature's body convulsed violently, and Kaito could see the dark magic unravelling, its massive form collapsing in on itself.

With a final, guttural roar, the Guardian's largest head lunged toward Kaito, venom dripping from its fangs. But before it could strike, Grushak, Borin, and Sylvara unleashed a combined assault. Grushak's axe cleaved into the creature's thick neck, while Borin's hammer smashed into its skull with bone-shattering force. Sylvara's arrows found their mark in the Guardian's glowing eyes, driving deep into its brain.

The Guardian's head jerked back, its body coiling in on itself as the dark magic sustaining it finally collapsed. Kaito felt the air shift as the oppressive weight of the temple's power lifted. The creature gave one last shudder before its body went limp, crashing to the ground with a deafening thud that sent dust and debris flying through the air.

For a moment, the chamber was silent. The massive, multi-headed serpent lay dead at their feet, its once-imposing form reduced to nothing more than a lifeless heap of scales and bone.

Kaito stumbled back, his chest heaving with exhaustion. They had done it. The Guardian was dead, and the artefact—the

dark power it had been protecting—was no longer out of their reach.

Grushak let out a triumphant roar, his bloodied axe raised high. “We did it!”

Borin clapped Kaito on the shoulder with a grin. “Not bad for a bunch of misfits, eh?”

Seris sheathed her daggers, her expression hard but relieved. “We’ve taken down the Guardian, but we can’t linger here. The warlords will be coming soon.”

Kaito nodded, though his body was still trembling from the battle. “We need to leave before they reach the temple. But we’ll take something with us.”

He glanced at the largest of the Guardian’s heads, now lying still at the far end of the chamber, its massive fangs bared even in death. “That head. We’re taking it back as proof.”

Grushak’s eyes lit up. “A trophy! Let’s see them call us mercenaries after this.”

Working together, they severed the largest of the serpent’s heads, the thick scales and bone making the process slow and gruelling. But when they were done, the massive head—nearly the size of Grushak himself—was hoisted up and wrapped in heavy cloth, ready to be carried back to the city.

With the artefact hidden and the Guardian’s head secured, the group made their way out of the temple. Kaito’s mind raced with thoughts of what was to come, but for the first time in what felt like an eternity, a sense of accomplishment washed over him.

The journey back to the city was long and exhausting, but there was a newfound energy among them—a sense that, for once, they had accomplished something undeniable. They

had defeated the Guardian, a beast of legend, and stopped the warlords from gaining control of the temple's ancient power. And with the giant serpent head in tow, they had tangible proof of their victory.

As they neared the outskirts of the city, Kaito felt a strange mix of emotions. The city had always been a place where he felt out of place, an outsider trapped in the body of an orc. He had been looked at with suspicion, fear, and disdain since the day he arrived. But now, for the first time, he was returning as a hero.

The city gates loomed ahead, and the guards on watch seemed to freeze as they spotted Kaito and his group approaching with the massive serpent's head in tow. One of the guards shouted down to the others, and soon, the gates were thrown open, a crowd gathering to see what was happening.

"Is that...?" one of the guards murmured, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"The Guardian," Grushak said proudly, tossing the head onto the ground in front of the gates. "We killed it."

The crowd began to murmur, a wave of astonishment rippling through them as they realised what they were seeing. The serpent's head, with its fangs as long as a man's arm, lay before them—a testament to the battle that Kaito and his companions had fought and won.

The whispers grew louder, and soon, cheers erupted from the gathered townsfolk.

"They did it!" someone shouted. "They killed the Guardian!"

Kaito stood at the front of the group, stunned as the crowd surged forward, cheering and shouting their names. He could hardly believe it—after everything they had been through,

they were being welcomed not as outcasts or mercenaries, but as heroes.

The Guildmaster, Kaedric, soon appeared, pushing his way through the crowd, his eyes wide with disbelief as he took in the sight of the serpent's head. "By the gods," he breathed. "You actually did it. You killed the Guardian."

Kaito nodded, though his voice was lost in the overwhelming noise of the crowd. He felt a surge of pride, a feeling that he hadn't allowed himself to feel in a long time. For so long, he had been fighting to prove himself, to show that he wasn't just a cursed orc, but something more. And now, standing in front of the city with the proof of their victory at his feet, he realised he had finally done it.

"You've earned a place among the greatest adventurers this city has ever known," Kaedric said, his voice filled with respect. "You and your companions will be remembered for this."

Kaito's chest swelled with emotion as the crowd continued to cheer, their voices a chorus of praise and admiration. For the first time since he had arrived in this world, he felt truly recognized—not as a monster, but as a hero.

He turned to look at his companions—Grushak, Borin, Sylvara, Seris, and even Dorian. They had fought together, bled together, and now, they stood together as heroes. Whatever challenges lay ahead, they would face them as a united force.

And for the first time in a long while, Kaito allowed himself to believe that, no matter what, they could win.

27

The Second Trial

The noise of the cheering crowd still echoed in Kaito's ears long after they had retreated into the cool interior of the Guild Hall. His heart was still racing from the reception—he had never experienced anything like it. The city had welcomed him and his companions as heroes, their victory over the Guardian already spreading like wildfire through the streets. But here, inside the quiet sanctum of the Guild Hall, the atmosphere was starkly different. The warmth of celebration was replaced by a heavy tension.

Guildmaster Kaedric stood at the head of the long table, his face set in a grim expression. His hands were clasped tightly behind his back, and his eyes were focused on Kaito with an intensity that made him uneasy.

"You've done well," Kaedric said, his voice low but filled with respect. "You and your companions accomplished something that few have dared to even attempt. You've faced the Guardian of the temple, and you've returned victorious. That alone is enough to earn you recognition as one of the Guild's greatest."

Kaito glanced at Grushak, Borin, Seris, Sylvara, and Dorian, who stood beside him. They all carried the marks of battle—their clothes torn, their weapons still nicked from the fight—but they shared a look of pride. They had done it together, and their bond, however fragile, had survived the test of the temple.

"But," Kaedric continued, his tone growing darker, "your journey is far from over. Killing the Guardian was only the first step, Kaito."

Kaito's heart sank a little, the elation of their victory dimming as he realised what Kaedric was leading to. His eyes met the Guildmaster's, and he could already feel the weight of the next trial looming ahead of him.

"You seek to become a paladin," Kaedric said, his voice hard. "A paladin's path is not simply about defeating monsters or protecting the innocent. It is a test of spirit, of strength, and of sacrifice. What you have done so far—facing the Guardian and stopping the warlords from gaining access to the temple—was impressive. But to earn your place as a paladin, you must face something far more dangerous. Something that could destroy not just you, but this entire world."

Kaito's stomach twisted. "What do you mean?"

Kaedric walked around the table slowly, his gaze never leaving Kaito. "The Guardian was only a protector, a guardian of the temple's outer defences. What lies beneath the temple—what the warlords truly seek—is a force far more ancient and far more dangerous than anything you've encountered."

The air in the room seemed to grow colder as Kaedric spoke, the gravity of his words sinking in. Kaito had felt the dark power within the temple, the oppressive magic that had nearly overwhelmed him during their battle with the Guardian. But he hadn't understood the full scope of what they were dealing with.

"The temple was built long ago," Kaedric continued, "by a forgotten race that wielded a power known as the Primordial Flame. It is said to be a fragment of creation itself, a force that can both give life and destroy it. The Flame was sealed away in the temple to prevent it from falling into mortal hands, and the Guardian was placed there to protect it."

Kaedric's expression grew darker. "But that seal is weakening. The warlords you've been fighting are not the only ones searching for the Primordial Flame. Others are drawn to its power—forces even older and darker than you can imagine. If the Flame is unleashed, it will not only bring chaos to Valkra, but it could tear apart the very fabric of reality."

Kaito's chest tightened. This was far worse than he had imagined. He had thought their mission was to stop the warlords from gaining control of the temple's power, but now it seemed that the stakes were much higher. The Primordial Flame was more than just an ancient relic—it was a weapon of unimaginable power.

"How do we stop it?" Kaito asked, his voice steady despite the fear creeping into his bones.

Kaedric sighed, his shoulders heavy with the burden of the truth. "To become a paladin, Kaito, you must do more than just protect. You must be willing to face the darkness head-on, to sacrifice everything if necessary. The next trial you face will be to enter the heart of the temple and seal the Primordial Flame before it can be unleashed. It will not be easy. The temple's inner sanctum is far more dangerous than the outer chamber where you fought the Guardian."

Kaito swallowed hard, the enormity of the challenge settling in. "And if I fail?"

Kaedric's eyes were hard. "If you fail, the Flame will be released, and the world as we know it will cease to exist."

A heavy silence settled over the room. Kaito could feel the weight of the task pressing down on him. It wasn't just about becoming a paladin anymore. It was about stopping a force that could destroy everything—Valkra, the people he had come to care for, and even the world he had left behind.

Grushak stepped forward, his voice gruff but filled with determination. "We'll go with you. This is bigger than just one person, Kaito. We've come this far together. We're not backing down now."

Sylvara nodded in agreement. "You'll need us. The temple's magic will be more dangerous the deeper we go."

Borin grinned, his hammer resting on his shoulder. "And if there's something worse than the Guardian waiting for us, I'd love to smash its face in."

Even Seris, who had been quiet throughout Kaedric's explanation, spoke up. "You've trusted me this far. I'm not turning back now. If you're going to face this thing, you'll need all the help you can get."

Kaito felt a swell of gratitude as he looked at his companions. They had been through so much together, and despite the dangers ahead, they were still standing by his side.

But this trial... this was something different.

Kaedric stepped closer to Kaito, his voice lowering. "You must understand, Kaito, that the path of a paladin is not one that guarantees survival. To be a paladin is to sacrifice—to place the fate of others above your own. This trial will test every part of you, not just your strength, but your soul. You've been marked by the light, and that light may be the only thing strong enough to contain the Flame. But the cost..."

He paused, his eyes heavy with the weight of what he was about to say.

"The cost may be your life."

Kaito's breath caught in his throat, the full realisation crashing over him. The light inside him—the divine force that had protected him time and time again—was the key to

sealing the Flame. But using that light might come at a price too high for him to pay.

He looked around at his companions, the people who had fought beside him, and then back to Kaedric. The path was clear, even if it was one that terrified him. If he wanted to become a paladin—if he wanted to stop the warlords and save this world—he had no choice but to face this trial.

"I'll do it," Kaito said, his voice steady. "I'll face the trial and seal the Primordial Flame."

Kaedric nodded, though his expression was grim. "Very well. Prepare yourselves. The journey to the inner sanctum of the temple will be the most dangerous one you've faced yet. The warlords are moving, and there are other forces at work. But if anyone can stop this, it's you."

Kaito felt the weight of his decision settle in his chest. The road ahead was dark, and the risks were greater than anything he had ever imagined. But he couldn't turn back. Not now. Not when so much was at stake.

28

Test of the Heart

The sun was just beginning to dip below the jagged horizon of Valkra, casting long shadows over the rocky terrain. The group had set out from the city early that morning, their path leading them back toward the temple—this time, into its most dangerous depths. The weight of Kaedric's warning hung over them like a dark cloud, but the camaraderie between Kaito and his companions had only grown stronger.

Even so, the journey was far from easy. As they trekked through the wilderness, each step brought them closer to the heart of the temple, but it also unearthed the fears and burdens that each member of the party carried within.

The first few miles passed in relative silence, save for the crunch of gravel beneath their boots and the occasional flap of Sylvara's cloak in the wind. The tension was thick, but Grushak, ever the orc warrior, eventually broke it.

"You know, Kaito," Grushak grunted, glancing at him from the corner of his eye, "I've fought plenty of beasts in my time. But this whole 'save the world' thing? Never thought I'd be caught up in something like that."

Kaito smiled, grateful for the distraction from his own swirling thoughts. "I didn't either. I mean... I'm just a high school kid."

Borin chuckled, the sound deep and gruff. "Aye, you keep saying that, but you've sure outgrown whatever kid you were. You've got the heart of a warrior now."

Seris, who had been walking a bit ahead of the group, turned and raised an eyebrow. "And what's a warrior without his secrets, Borin? Or have you forgotten that you haven't exactly been forthcoming with your past?"

The dwarf scowled, but there was no real malice in it. "I'm not the only one holding my cards close to my chest. You've been slippery as a snake since the day we met."

"You're both mysterious," Kaito interjected with a grin, but Seris gave him a look that was part amusement, part warning.

Grushak snorted. "Everyone's got their complications. Borin's probably hiding some tragic family drama, and Seris, well—"

"Seris is hiding about half of her life story," Dorian interrupted, his voice cool but not unkind. "She's always been good at that."

Kaito tensed, expecting Seris to lash back at Dorian, but she just smirked and twirled one of her daggers between her fingers. "Oh, I don't deny it. But I'm not the only one with a past they'd rather forget, am I, Dorian?"

Dorian stiffened slightly, his face darkening. "Let's focus on the mission."

A tense silence fell over the group again, but this time, Kaito could sense the deeper emotions bubbling beneath the surface. Each of his companions had their own burdens, their own struggles. And while they were united in their goal to stop the warlords and seal the Primordial Flame, those individual stories were now beginning to surface.

The next part of their journey took them through a dense, overgrown forest, the kind where every tree felt like it was watching them. The deeper they went, the more alive the forest seemed, with thick vines curling down from the branches and strange, glowing mushrooms sprouting from

the ground. It was an ancient place, humming with old magic that Kaito could feel in the pit of his stomach.

"There's something not right about this place," Sylvara muttered, her elven eyes scanning the shadows. "The trees are too still, and the air feels... wrong."

"It's the magic," Dorian said quietly, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "This forest is tainted. Valkra has been corrupted for years—since before the warlords took control."

Kaito nodded, sensing the same unease. The light inside him flickered in response to the dark magic that hung in the air, as if it was warning him of something lurking nearby.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before they encountered their first obstacle.

A low growl echoed through the trees, and from the shadows, a group of strange, twisted creatures emerged. They were humanoid, but their skin was covered in bark-like scales, their limbs elongated and distorted. Their eyes glowed with a sickly green light, and they moved with the slow, deliberate grace of predators stalking their prey.

"Great," Borin muttered, gripping his hammer. "Woodland horrors. Just what we needed."

"Stay sharp," Grushak growled, hefting his axe. "They're fast."

The creatures didn't wait long to attack. They lunged forward with unnatural speed, their clawed hands reaching for the group with terrifying precision. Kaito drew his dagger, the light inside him flaring as he met the first of the creatures head-on. His blade cut through the creature's bark-like skin, and it let out a shriek of pain, but Kaito could feel that this fight wasn't going to be easy.

"They're strong," he shouted as he dodged another strike. "And they're resisting magic!"

Sylvara's arrows flew through the air, striking the creatures with deadly accuracy, but for every one that fell, two more seemed to take its place. The air was thick with the sound of battle—the clang of steel, the roar of Grushak's axe, and the hiss of Seris's daggers as she danced through the fray with deadly grace.

"We need to take them down faster!" Seris shouted as she ducked under a creature's swing and buried her dagger into its side.

Kaito nodded, but as the creatures kept coming, he knew they couldn't keep this up forever. The light inside him pulsed, and in a moment of desperation, he reached out to it, letting it guide his movements. His dagger flared with divine energy, and when he struck the next creature, the force of the light exploded through its body, reducing it to ash in an instant.

"They're weak to your light!" Dorian called out as he slashed through another creature. "Use it!"

Kaito nodded, his heart racing as he let the light flow through him, his strikes becoming faster, more precise. The creatures recoiled from the brightness, their movements becoming more erratic as the divine energy tore through them.

One by one, the twisted creatures fell, their bodies disintegrating into dust as Kaito's light burned through them. The others fought fiercely, Grushak and Borin cutting down any that came too close, while Seris and Dorian worked together to keep the creatures at bay.

Finally, after what felt like hours but was likely only minutes, the last of the creatures fell, its body crumbling to ash as Kaito's light consumed it. The forest grew quiet again, the

oppressive magic lifting slightly as the creatures were defeated.

Kaito lowered his dagger, breathing heavily. "That was... intense."

Sylvara nodded, her face pale but calm. "There will be more of them. This entire forest is corrupted."

"We can handle them," Grushak said, wiping the blood from his axe. "We've handled worse."

Borin snorted, leaning on his hammer. "Speak for yourself. I've got splinters the size of arrows in my arms."

Seris smiled slightly, though there was a hint of weariness in her eyes. "You'll live, Borin. Besides, you've been itching for a good fight since we left the city."

The dwarf grumbled but didn't deny it, and the group shared a moment of quiet laughter, the tension from the battle easing.

Kaito, however, couldn't shake the feeling that the fight had been a warning—a sign that the closer they got to the temple, the more dangerous the encounters would become. The creatures they had just fought weren't just random monsters—they were manifestations of the dark magic that permeated Valkra, and they were growing stronger the deeper they went.

"We need to keep moving," Kaito said after a moment, his voice filled with determination. "The longer we stay here, the more likely we'll run into something worse."

The group nodded in agreement, and together, they pushed forward through the forest, the weight of their mission pressing down on them more heavily with each step.

As they made their way out of the cursed woods, the landscape began to change. The dense trees thinned out, giving way to jagged, rocky cliffs and crumbling ruins that stretched out across the horizon. The air was thinner here, colder, and the oppressive magic that had surrounded them in the forest seemed to retreat slightly, though it was still ever-present.

They reached a plateau overlooking a valley where the ruins of an ancient city lay in the distance, half-buried in rock and overgrown with vines. It was a haunting sight—one that seemed frozen in time, long abandoned and forgotten.

“What is this place?” Kaito asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Seris stepped forward, her eyes scanning the ruins. “It’s the city of Calydra,” she said softly. “It was destroyed centuries ago, during the first great war. The temple lies beyond it.”

Kaito stared at the ruins, a chill running down his spine. The city looked like it had been swallowed by the earth, its stone towers crumbled and half-buried in the ground. But even from this distance, he could feel the ancient magic that lingered there—a dark, foreboding presence that made his skin crawl.

“This is it,” Dorian said, his voice heavy. “The final stretch.”

Grushak hefted his axe, his eyes narrowing as he looked toward the distant ruins. “Let’s get this over with.”

29

Ruins of Calydra

The ruins of Calydra loomed ahead like a dark spectre, the crumbling towers and twisted vines giving the place an air of forgotten power. The city had once been magnificent—now, it was nothing more than a graveyard. The wind howled through the broken stones, carrying with it a faint whisper that sent chills down Kaito's spine. This wasn't just another stop on their journey; it was the threshold to the temple and the final leg of their mission.

The group stood at the edge of the plateau, staring down at the ruins with a mixture of awe and unease.

"Remind me again why we're walking into a haunted, destroyed city?" Borin grumbled, his hammer slung over his shoulder as he surveyed the path ahead. "I feel like I'm asking for a curse."

Sylvara, ever the voice of calm reason, shrugged. "It's either this, or we go through the warlord's camp. I'd take the haunted city."

Grushak chuckled, clapping Borin on the back with a heavy hand that nearly knocked him off his feet. "Besides, you love a good fight, Borin. And something tells me this place will give you plenty of action."

Borin shot him a glare. "Aye, but I prefer my enemies to bleed. Ghosts? Not so much."

Dorian, who had been silent for most of the trek, looked over at Kaito. "This is the only way. The warlords are coming, and if

we don't reach the temple before them, everything we've done will be for nothing."

Kaito nodded, but his thoughts were far from settled. The weight of Kaedric's warning about the Primordial Flame hung heavily over him. He hadn't shared all of it with the group—he hadn't told them that the trial ahead could very well cost him his life. But there was no turning back now. He was bound by the light inside him, the same light that might be the key to sealing the dark power once and for all.

"If we're going to do this," Kaito said, taking a deep breath, "we'd better be ready for anything."

Seris, who had been watching the distant ruins with narrowed eyes, smirked. "Anything? That sounds like an understatement." She twirled one of her daggers, her expression a mix of amusement and seriousness. "But hey, I'm always up for a good surprise."

The group started down the narrow path leading into the heart of the ruined city. The closer they got, the heavier the air seemed to grow, thick with ancient magic and memories of the past. Every step felt like it was carrying them deeper into a place where time itself had stopped, where the remnants of old battles and forgotten warriors still lingered.

As they reached the first of the collapsed buildings, Grushak took point, his axe resting on his shoulder, ready for anything that might jump out at them. The city was eerily silent, the wind still whispering through the cracks in the stone. The streets were overgrown with twisted vines and strange, glowing flowers that pulsed faintly in the dim light.

"I don't like this," Sylvara muttered, her bow ready in hand. "There's too much... quiet."

Grushak snorted. "Quiet's good. Means fewer things trying to kill us."

“Or more things waiting to kill us,” Borin added, casting a suspicious look at a nearby tower that seemed to sway slightly in the wind.

Kaito couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. The air was heavy with an unseen presence, as if the city itself was alive, observing them with a cold, calculating eye. He gripped his dagger tighter, the divine light inside him flickering in response to the dark magic that permeated the air.

They continued deeper into the ruins, weaving their way through narrow alleyways and collapsed structures. The deeper they went, the more distorted the landscape became—buildings that seemed to bend unnaturally, shadows that moved without reason, and the faint echo of voices long silenced by time.

Suddenly, a low, eerie sound echoed through the streets, like the groan of metal grinding against stone. The group froze, their eyes darting around for the source of the noise.

“What was that?” Kaito whispered, his heart pounding in his chest.

Before anyone could answer, the ground beneath them began to tremble. The cobblestones cracked and shifted, and from the crumbling ruins around them, strange figures began to emerge. They were humanoid but twisted, their bodies made of crumbling stone and metal, their faces featureless save for glowing eyes that burned with a cold, malevolent light.

“Great,” Borin muttered, raising his hammer. “Stone golems. Because of course.”

The golems moved slowly but deliberately, their heavy footsteps shaking the ground as they approached. There

were five of them, each one taller than Grushak, their massive arms swinging with deadly intent.

“Spread out!” Kaito shouted, drawing his dagger as the golems closed in. “Don’t let them surround us!”

Grushak grinned, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “Now this is more like it!” He charged forward, his axe raised high, and brought it down on the nearest golem. The blade struck true, sending shards of stone flying, but the golem barely flinched. It swung its massive arm in retaliation, knocking Grushak back with bone-rattling force.

“Grushak!” Kaito called, but the orc was already back on his feet, laughing as he wiped blood from his lip.

“That all you’ve got, rock-head?” Grushak growled, charging back into the fray.

Sylvara’s arrows flew through the air, striking the golems in their weak points—joints and cracks in the stone—but the creatures kept coming, relentless in their attack. Borin was holding his own, smashing through one of the golem’s legs and sending it toppling to the ground, but the others were still pressing forward.

“These things are tougher than they look!” Seris shouted as she dodged a swing from one of the golems and slashed at its back with her daggers. The metal creaked and groaned but didn’t give way easily.

Kaito’s light flared inside him, and he darted toward one of the golems, his dagger glowing with divine energy. He struck the creature in the chest, the light burning through the dark magic that held it together. The golem let out a low, guttural sound as it began to crumble, its body collapsing into a heap of stone and dust.

"They're weak to magic!" Kaito called out, his dagger still glowing with divine light. "Aim for their cores!"

Dorian nodded, his sword shimmering with arcane energy as he drove it into one of the golem's weak points. The creature shuddered, its body cracking as the magic inside it was disrupted. With a final, shuddering groan, the golem fell, its lifeless form crumbling into rubble.

One by one, the golems fell, their magic undone by Kaito's light and Dorian's precision. The last of them collapsed in a cloud of dust, and the group stood in the quiet aftermath, breathing heavily.

"Well," Borin said, leaning on his hammer. "That was fun."

Sylvara shook her head, her eyes scanning the ruins for any more threats. "This place is filled with traps and guardians. We need to be careful."

Kaito wiped the sweat from his brow, his heart still racing from the fight. The magic in the air was growing stronger the deeper they went, and he knew that the golems were just the beginning. The city of Calydra was a place of ancient power, and it wasn't going to let them pass easily.

They continued through the city, the eerie quiet returning as the golems' remains lay scattered across the street. The ruins grew more twisted, the buildings leaning at impossible angles, and the shadows growing darker with every step. The deeper they went, the more Kaito could feel the pull of the temple and the power that awaited them.

"Tell me, Seris," Dorian said after a long silence, his voice carefully neutral. "You seemed awfully familiar with this place. Been here before?"

Seris smirked, not looking back. "I've been in a lot of places, Dorian. Some of us like to explore."

"And some of us like to hide things," Dorian muttered under his breath.

Before the tension could escalate, Sylvara held up her hand. "Hold up. Something's wrong."

The group halted, their weapons at the ready. Kaito strained his ears, but all he could hear was the wind whispering through the ruins. Then, from the shadows of a nearby building, something stirred.

A figure emerged—a man, ragged and gaunt, his clothes torn and his eyes wide with fear. He stumbled toward them, his voice hoarse and desperate. "Help... please..."

Kaito rushed forward, catching the man as he nearly collapsed. "What happened? Who are you?"

The man's eyes were wild, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "The temple... I tried to reach it, but the guardians... they won't let anyone through. They're protecting something—something dark..."

Kaito's stomach twisted. The man was a warning—a reminder of the dangers that awaited them inside the temple. Whatever dark forces were at play in Calydra, they were only going to grow stronger.

"We need to move," Dorian said, his voice grim. "If we wait any longer, the warlords will catch up."

Kaito nodded, his resolve hardening.

30

Dark Secrets of Calydra

The ragged man's warning echoed in Kaito's mind as the group moved deeper into the ruins of Calydra. Every step felt heavier, as though the air itself was thick with anticipation. Whatever dark magic was buried within the temple—and whatever creatures protected it—it was waiting for them.

"Guardians," Grushak muttered under his breath as he gripped his axe tighter. "Why does it always have to be guardians?"

Borin snorted, adjusting the strap of his hammer. "You'd think we'd get a break from ancient horrors for once."

"Not a chance," Seris added with a smirk. "The deeper we go, the worse it's going to get. Consider this a warm-up."

Dorian walked a few paces behind, quiet as always but alert, his gaze flicking to Seris every now and then. Kaito could sense the tension between the two of them, an unspoken history that neither had fully revealed. But there was no time to address that now—not with the dangers ahead.

They passed through the broken remains of what had once been a grand marketplace, now overrun by vines and rubble. The eerie silence of the city pressed down on them, as though the stones themselves were watching, waiting for them to make a mistake.

Sylvara paused near one of the crumbled buildings, her eyes narrowing. "Something's wrong here."

"What do you mean?" Kaito asked, coming to a stop beside her.

She pointed to the ground, where the rubble had shifted unnaturally, almost as if something had disturbed it recently. "Tracks. Someone—or something—has been through here."

The group tensed immediately. Kaito's hand instinctively went to his dagger, the divine light inside him flickering in response to the tension. "Warlords' scouts?"

"Maybe," Dorian said quietly, his eyes scanning the surroundings. "Or worse."

Grushak let out a low growl. "If something's watching us, it's about to get a real close look at my axe."

Borin hefted his hammer with a grim smile. "Let's hope whatever it is bleeds this time."

They continued forward, more cautiously now, their eyes and ears alert to any sign of movement. The deeper they ventured into the ruins, the more twisted the landscape became. The once-grand buildings of Calydra were leaning at unnatural angles, the stones cracked and warped as if time itself had unravelled within the city's boundaries.

As they passed beneath a crumbling archway, a sudden rustling sound caught Kaito's attention. He froze, holding up his hand to signal the others to stop. The group fell silent, their weapons at the ready, as the sound grew louder—a soft, shuffling movement, like something scraping against the stone.

"Did you hear that?" Kaito whispered, his pulse quickening.

Seris narrowed her eyes, her hands hovering over her daggers. "We're not alone."

Before anyone could react, a dark figure burst from the shadows of a nearby building. It moved with unnatural speed,

its limbs distorted and twisted. At first glance, it looked human, but as it stumbled into the light, Kaito realised it was anything but. Its skin was mottled and decayed, its eyes glowing with a sickly green light, and its mouth hung open in a silent scream.

"Undead!" Sylvara hissed, drawing her bow.

Grushak's axe was already in his hands. "Finally, something to hit!"

The creature lunged at them, its movements jerky and unnatural, as though it was being controlled by some unseen force. Grushak was the first to meet it, his axe cleaving through the creature's torso with a sickening crunch. But even as the undead's body crumbled to the ground, more figures emerged from the shadows, their glowing eyes fixed on the group.

"They're coming from everywhere!" Borin shouted as he swung his hammer into another undead, its brittle bones shattering under the force of the blow.

Kaito's light flared as he slashed at one of the creatures, his dagger glowing with divine energy. The undead recoiled from the light, its decayed flesh hissing as the magic burned through it. But for every creature they cut down, more seemed to appear, rising from the rubble like shadows brought to life.

"There's too many of them!" Sylvara called out, her arrows finding their mark in the undead, but the sheer number of enemies was overwhelming.

Dorian slashed through another creature, his sword crackling with arcane energy. "We can't stay here! They'll overwhelm us!"

Kaito knew he was right. The undead were coming from every direction, and the group was being pushed back, inch by inch, toward the crumbling walls of the ruined city. His light was

holding them off for now, but he could feel it weakening with every strike.

"We need to move!" Kaito shouted. "Head for the temple!"

Seris nodded, darting through the chaos with her usual grace. "Follow me!"

They broke into a sprint, cutting their way through the mass of undead as they headed toward the temple. The creatures swarmed around them, but Kaito's light and the group's combined strength kept them at bay, at least for now.

As they ran through the ruins, Kaito couldn't help but feel the weight of the dark magic pressing down on them. The undead were being drawn to something—something powerful and ancient, and he had a sinking feeling it was the very thing they were trying to stop.

They reached a narrow passage between two crumbling towers, and Seris led them through, her movements swift and sure. The undead were still behind them, but the narrow path slowed their progress, giving the group a chance to regroup.

"Keep moving!" Grushak urged, swinging his axe to clear the path.

The passage opened up into a massive courtyard, at the centre of which stood the entrance to the temple. The ancient structure was partially buried in rubble, its massive stone doors covered in glowing runes. The air around the temple crackled with energy, and Kaito could feel the pull of the power inside.

"That's it," Seris said, her voice breathless. "The entrance to the inner sanctum."

Kaito's heart raced as he stared at the temple. This was it. The heart of the trial—the place where the Primordial Flame was

sealed away. The weight of the moment pressed down on him, but there was no time to hesitate.

Behind them, the undead were still closing in, their glowing eyes visible in the dim light of the ruined city.

"We can't let them catch up," Dorian said, his sword at the ready. "We need to get inside."

Kaito stepped forward, his hand reaching out toward the runes on the temple door. The divine light inside him flickered, and the runes began to glow in response. The ancient magic of the temple recognized the light, and with a low rumble, the massive stone doors slowly began to open.

As the doors creaked open, a cold wind rushed out from the depths of the temple, carrying with it the faint scent of ash and brimstone. The darkness inside the temple was thick, oppressive, and Kaito could feel the power of the Primordial Flame pulsing within, like a heartbeat buried deep within the earth.

"This is it," Kaito said quietly, his voice steady but filled with determination. "We go in, we seal the Flame, and we stop the warlords."

Grushak grinned, his axe resting on his shoulder. "Sounds simple enough."

Borin grunted. "Simple? Sure. But we've already seen what this place can throw at us. It's not going to be easy."

Sylvara drew her bow, her expression calm but focused. "Nothing worth doing ever is."

Seris glanced at Kaito, her eyes unreadable. "Let's just hope we get out of this alive."

With one last look at the group, Kaito stepped forward, crossing the threshold into the temple. The air inside was colder than he expected, the walls lined with ancient carvings that told stories of forgotten gods and long-dead kings. The floor beneath their feet was smooth stone, worn down by centuries of time, and the further they went, the more oppressive the atmosphere became.

As they descended deeper into the temple, the light inside Kaito flickered, growing stronger with every step. He could feel the power of the Flame drawing closer, its dark energy mingling with the divine light inside him.

And then, without warning, a deep, rumbling voice echoed through the chamber.

"Who dares enter the sacred temple of the Flame?"

The voice was ancient, filled with power and authority, and it sent a shiver down Kaito's spine.

Grushak raised his axe, his eyes scanning the darkness. "Show yourself!"

From the shadows, a figure emerged—a massive, armoured being with glowing eyes and a crown of flame atop its head. It moved with slow, deliberate steps, its presence filling the chamber with a suffocating weight.

"I am the guardian of the Primordial Flame," the figure intoned, its voice like thunder. "And you will not leave this place alive."

Kaito's heart pounded as the figure raised its massive weapon, the flames licking the edges of the blade. The air crackled with power, and Kaito knew that they were about to face their greatest challenge yet.

"Get ready," Kaito said, his voice steady. "This is the real test."

31

Battle of the Flame

The massive figure of the Primordial Guardian stepped forward, its every movement sending tremors through the ancient stone beneath Kaito's feet. The light from the flaming crown atop the Guardian's head cast flickering shadows against the temple walls, giving the already dark and oppressive chamber an even more menacing atmosphere. Kaito's heart pounded in his chest as the full weight of the creature's presence pressed down on him. This was no ordinary guardian—it was something far older, far more dangerous than any of them had faced before.

The Guardian stood over twelve feet tall, its body forged from some kind of advanced technology that had survived the collapse of the old world. It gleamed with an otherworldly metal, covered in runes and etched with glowing symbols that pulsed with energy. The armour appeared almost alive, shifting and adapting as the creature moved, and its massive sword—longer than a man was tall—crackled with fire and lightning.

"We're out of our league here," Borin muttered, gripping his hammer tightly.

Grushak grinned, despite the looming threat. "I don't care how big it is. It bleeds, it dies."

Kaito took a step forward, feeling the divine light inside him pulse in response to the Guardian's overwhelming presence. He raised his dagger, his hand trembling only slightly as he tried to steady his breath. "We've got no choice. We take this thing down, or we don't leave this place."

Dorian's sword glimmered with arcane light as he stepped up beside Kaito, his voice calm but tense. "Then let's make sure it's the Guardian that doesn't leave."

The Guardian's burning eyes fixed on them, and with a sound like the grinding of stone, it spoke again. "You seek to seal the Flame, to defy the will of the ancients. You are not worthy to touch the sacred power. Prepare to face oblivion."

Without warning, the Guardian lunged forward with terrifying speed for something so large. Its sword cleaved through the air, trailing fire and lightning as it crashed down toward the group. Kaito barely had time to leap to the side as the massive blade slammed into the ground, sending out a shockwave that cracked the stone floor and knocked them off balance.

"Move!" Kaito shouted, scrambling to his feet as the Guardian swung again, its blade cutting through the air like a storm. The others scattered, dodging the massive strikes as the Guardian's attacks tore through the chamber, leaving destruction in their wake.

Grushak was the first to counterattack. With a roar, he charged forward, his axe raised high, and brought it down with all his strength on the Guardian's armoured leg. Sparks flew as the blade connected, but the Guardian barely reacted, its advanced armour shrugging off the blow. It turned its burning gaze on Grushak, swinging its sword in a wide arc. Grushak barely managed to throw himself back, the sword missing him by inches and smashing into the ground where he'd been standing.

"This thing's tougher than it looks!" Grushak growled, backing away as the Guardian turned its attention to the rest of the group.

Sylvara loosed a volley of arrows, her sharp eyes pinpointing weak points in the Guardian's armour. Each arrow struck true,

embedding itself in the cracks between the metal plates, but the Guardian's armour was adaptive, shifting and regenerating to seal the wounds.

"This isn't working," Sylvara called out, her voice strained as she fired another arrow. "Its armour's repairing itself."

Borin swung his hammer at the Guardian's ankle, trying to find a weak point, but the metal groaned and cracked under the force without breaking. "It's like hitting a mountain!"

Kaito could feel the pressure building. The Guardian's attacks were relentless, and nothing they did seemed to slow it down. His light flickered inside him, responding to the ancient magic that powered the Guardian, but it wasn't enough. They needed something more—something that could break through the advanced technology that protected the creature.

"Seris!" Kaito shouted, dodging another strike from the Guardian's sword. "We need to find its core! There has to be something powering it."

Seris darted through the chaos, her daggers flashing as she tried to get closer to the Guardian's back, where the runes seemed to pulse with more intensity. "I'm on it!"

The Guardian swung again, its sword carving through the temple walls as it tried to strike down Kaito. He rolled to the side, the heat from the blade scorching the stone where he had been moments before. His heart raced, adrenaline pumping through his veins. They couldn't keep dodging forever. One wrong move, and the Guardian's next strike would be fatal.

Seris darted behind the Guardian, her daggers slashing at the glowing runes on its back. Sparks flew, and for a moment, the Guardian hesitated, its movements slowing as the runes dimmed slightly.

"There!" Seris shouted. "The runes on its back! That's where the power is coming from!"

Kaito's eyes narrowed. The runes. Of course. The ancient technology was being powered by the same dark magic that permeated the temple. If they could disrupt the magic, they could bring the Guardian down.

"Grushak, Borin!" Kaito called. "Focus on the runes! We need to hit it where it's weakest!"

Grushak roared in response, charging forward once more. He swung his axe with all his might, aiming for the Guardian's back where the runes pulsed. The blade connected, and this time, the Guardian let out a low, rumbling growl as the runes cracked under the force of the blow.

Borin followed suit, slamming his hammer into the same spot. The runes flickered, and the Guardian staggered, its movements slowing.

"We're getting through!" Dorian shouted, his sword glowing with arcane energy as he struck at the Guardian's chest, aiming for another set of runes that glowed with fiery light. The blade cut through the armour, sending a shockwave of magic rippling through the air.

The Guardian roared, its flaming eyes blazing with fury as it lashed out with its sword, swinging wildly in an attempt to crush the group. The ground shook with every strike, and the air crackled with the heat of the Guardian's fury.

Kaito felt the divine light inside him flare, responding to the magic that filled the air. He knew what he had to do.

"Keep it distracted!" Kaito shouted, his voice barely audible over the roar of the battle. "I'm going for the core!"

Grushak and Borin redoubled their efforts, hacking away at the Guardian's armour while Sylvara continued to rain arrows on its weak points. Seris darted in and out of the Guardian's reach, her daggers finding every crack and gap in the armour, slicing through the runes that powered it.

Kaito sprinted toward the Guardian's back, his dagger glowing brighter with every step. The light inside him pulsed, growing stronger as he neared the core of the Guardian's power. He could feel the connection between the divine light and the ancient magic that powered the creature. It was fragile—barely holding together under the weight of the Guardian's fury.

He leaped onto the Guardian's back, the heat from the runes searing his skin as he climbed toward the glowing core at the base of its neck. The divine light inside him surged, filling him with strength as he raised his dagger high.

With a cry, Kaito drove the glowing blade into the core, the divine light exploding from the dagger and spreading through the Guardian's body. The runes on its armour flared, and for a moment, the entire temple was bathed in brilliant light.

The Guardian let out a deafening roar, its body convulsing as the divine light tore through the dark magic that powered it. The runes cracked and shattered, and the flames on the Guardian's crown flickered and died.

With one final, shuddering groan, the Guardian collapsed, its massive form crashing to the ground in a heap of broken metal and shattered stone.

For a moment, the chamber was silent. The only sound was the distant crackling of the Guardian's dying flames.

Kaito stumbled back, his chest heaving as the light inside him slowly dimmed. He had done it. They had done it. The Guardian was dead.

Grushak let out a triumphant laugh, raising his axe in victory. "That's how you take down a giant!"

Borin wiped sweat from his brow, his grin wide. "Not bad, kid. Not bad at all."

Sylvara lowered her bow, her eyes still scanning the temple for any sign of danger. "Let's not celebrate just yet. The Flame is still ahead."

Seris sheathed her daggers, her smirk returning. "I've got to admit, Kaito. You're full of surprises."

Kaito smiled weakly, still catching his breath. "We're not done yet."

Dorian, who had been silent, stepped forward and placed a hand on Kaito's shoulder. "You did it. But we have to seal the Flame before the warlords get here."

Kaito nodded. The battle had been won, but the true challenge still lay ahead. The Primordial Flame—the source of the temple's power—was waiting for them in the heart of the sanctum. And if they didn't seal it in time, all of this would be for nothing.

With renewed determination, the group turned their attention to the massive stone doors that led deeper into the temple, toward the Flame. The battle had been brutal.

32

The Warlord's Wrath

The aftermath of the battle with the Guardian left the air heavy and still, as if the entire temple was holding its breath. Kaito and his companions stood in the massive chamber, their bodies battered and bloodied, but victorious. The Guardian's crumbled form lay motionless at their feet, its once-glowing runes now lifeless, the flames of its crown extinguished.

But they had no time to celebrate. The massive stone doors at the far end of the chamber stood slightly ajar, revealing a faint, fiery glow beyond. It was the light of the Primordial Flame—the ancient power they had come to seal away. And they weren't the only ones after it.

"They're coming," Dorian said, his voice low and urgent. "The warlords won't let us take the Flame without a fight."

Kaito's heart pounded as he turned to face the entrance. The warlords had been closing in ever since they had left the city, and now, they were here. The final confrontation was inevitable.

Grushak spat on the ground and hefted his axe. "Let them come. After what we just faced, I'm ready for anything."

Borin grunted in agreement, though his expression was grim. "We don't have time to waste. If they get their hands on the Flame before we seal it, it's over."

Seris, always one step ahead, stepped closer to Kaito, her daggers glinting in the dim light. "We need to move fast."

Whatever's inside that chamber, we have to reach it before they do."

But before they could make another move, the sound of footsteps echoed through the temple. Slow, deliberate, and heavy, the noise carried with it a sense of dark purpose. Shadows danced across the broken stone walls as figures emerged from the entrance, their forms cloaked in darkness.

And then, from the shadows, a figure stepped forward—tall, imposing, and draped in armour that shimmered with the same dark magic that had filled the temple. His presence was suffocating, his very aura radiating power and malice. This was no ordinary warlord. He was the leader, the one who had been pulling the strings from the very beginning.

Warlord Khaedir.

His helmet gleamed under the faint light of the Flame, and his eyes, burning with cold fury, locked onto Kaito. The room seemed to grow colder as he approached, his hand resting on the hilt of a massive sword that pulsed with dark energy.

"Kaito..." Khaedir's voice was low, a growl that reverberated through the chamber. "So, you're the one who's been causing me all this trouble."

Kaito felt the weight of the warlord's gaze, but he didn't back down. His hand tightened on his dagger, the divine light inside him flickering in response to Khaedir's dark magic. "We're here to stop you. You're not taking the Flame."

Khaedir chuckled, a dark, hollow sound that echoed through the chamber. "You think you can stop me? You, an orc pretending to be a hero? You have no idea what power you're dealing with."

Grushak stepped forward, his axe raised. "Power or no power, we've already taken down your precious Guardian. You're next."

Khaedir's eyes flicked to Grushak, and for a moment, the warlord's smirk widened. "Ah, the brute. You may have bested the Guardian, but you're out of your depth here. I've been waiting for this moment for years. The Flame will be mine."

Dorian, his voice calm but deadly, stepped beside Kaito. "The Flame isn't something you can control, Khaedir. If you unleash its power, you'll destroy everything—Valkra, the world... even yourself."

Khaedir's eyes gleamed with dark amusement. "I don't need to control it. I only need to harness it long enough to reshape this world. You see, I'm not interested in balance or peace. I want chaos. I want the world to burn, to rebuild it in my image."

"You're insane," Sylvara spat, her bow drawn and ready.

"Am I?" Khaedir said, his voice dripping with malice. "Or am I the only one willing to do what it takes to change this broken world?"

Kaito could feel the tension in the air, the inevitable clash that was about to erupt. His heart raced, but he knew there was no turning back now. They had come too far, fought too hard, to let someone like Khaedir walk away with the power of the Primordial Flame.

"You think you can use the Flame to remake the world, but you're just another tyrant trying to bend power to your will. That's not how it works. The Flame will consume you."

Khaedir's eyes narrowed. "You speak as though you understand the Flame. But you don't. You're just a child playing with forces far beyond your understanding."

Kaito's light flared in response, and he felt the divine power inside him rise to meet the dark energy emanating before him."

33

The Fall and Rise

Kaito's muscles strained as his dagger clashed with Warlord Khaedir's massive sword, the sheer force of their weapons sending sparks flying into the dim chamber. He pushed with everything he had, the divine light inside him blazing like a beacon against the warlord's dark magic. But Khaedir was stronger—far stronger than Kaito had anticipated. His power was overwhelming, a force that seemed to seep into the very air, twisting and suffocating the light within Kaito.

"I can feel your struggle, boy," Khaedir sneered, his voice low and mocking as he leaned into the clash. His eyes burned with cold fury. "You think the light inside you makes you strong? You're nothing. You don't understand the power you're up against."

Kaito gritted his teeth, his muscles trembling as he tried to hold his ground. The warlord's strength was like a tidal wave, threatening to crush him beneath its weight. He could feel the divine light flickering, its power waning as Khaedir's dark energy pressed in from all sides.

"Kaito, fall back!" Dorian shouted, but Kaito couldn't move. He was locked in place, his feet sliding backward as Khaedir's sword inched closer to his chest.

Then, with a dark laugh, Khaedir's free hand shot forward, crackling with dark magic. A surge of power slammed into Kaito's chest like a battering ram, knocking the breath from his lungs. The impact sent him flying backward, his dagger slipping from his grasp as he crashed into the temple wall with bone-rattling force. The world spun as he hit the ground, gasping for air, the taste of blood filling his mouth.

"Kaito!" Seris's voice cut through the fog in his mind, but everything seemed distant, blurry. He tried to stand, but his limbs felt heavy, unresponsive.

Khaedir towered over him, his sword gleaming in the firelight. "I told you, boy," he said, his voice dripping with contempt. "You're not strong enough."

Before Kaito could react, the warlord raised his hand, and dark tendrils of magic erupted from the floor, wrapping around Kaito's limbs like iron chains. He struggled, trying to break free, but the magic was too strong. The more he fought, the tighter the tendrils constricted, pulling him down.

"Kaito!" Grushak roared, charging forward with his axe raised, but Khaedir simply waved his hand. A wave of dark energy exploded outward, sending Grushak, Borin, and Dorian sprawling across the chamber.

Sylvara fired an arrow, but Khaedir caught it mid-flight with a flick of his wrist, the projectile turning to ash in his hand. Seris, quick as ever, darted toward the warlord, her daggers flashing in the dim light, but before she could reach him, Khaedir slammed his sword into the ground.

The entire temple shook.

The floor beneath Kaito and his companions cracked, and with a deafening roar, the ground gave way. Kaito felt himself falling, plummeting into the darkness below as the ancient stone crumbled around them. His stomach lurched as he tumbled through the air, the world spinning in a blur of shadow and debris.

For a moment, there was nothing but the cold wind rushing past his face, and then—impact. He hit the ground hard, the force knocking the breath from his lungs. Pain shot through his body as he lay there, gasping for air, the darkness pressing in from all sides.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there—seconds? Minutes?—before he heard the others stirring nearby.

"Everyone okay?" Borin's voice was rough, but alive.

Kaito groaned, forcing himself to sit up despite the throbbing pain in his body. "I'm... I'm fine."

Seris was already on her feet, dusting herself off. "What the hell just happened?"

"Khaedir," Dorian growled, pushing a piece of rubble off his legs. "He's sealed us down here."

The chamber around them was a maze of collapsed stone and twisted roots. The air was thick with dust, and the only light came from faintly glowing runes on the walls, remnants of the temple's ancient magic. Above them, the ceiling had caved in, sealing the entrance completely. They were trapped.

Kaito clenched his fists, frustration and anger boiling in his chest. They had been so close—so close to stopping Khaedir—and now, the warlord was free to take the Primordial Flame and march on the capital with his army.

He had failed.

"No time to feel sorry for ourselves," Grushak said, grim but determined. "We need to get out of here and stop that bastard before he burns the world down."

"But how?" Sylvara asked, scanning the chamber. "We're trapped."

Kaito stood, the divine light inside him dim but still flickering. "We'll find a way." He looked around the chamber, his eyes drawn to the glowing runes on the walls. There was something strange about them—something familiar.

“What is it?” Dorian asked, noticing Kaito’s focus.

Kaito stepped closer to the runes, his fingers brushing the ancient carvings. The light inside him flared, responding to the magic in the walls. And then, as if on instinct, he reached deeper—into the light within himself—and something answered. A pulse of power shot through him, and the runes on the walls glowed brighter.

“This... this place is connected to the Flame,” Kaito whispered, the realisation hitting him like a bolt of lightning. “There’s more down here. Something hidden.”

Seris raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“The magic in this temple is older than we thought,” Kaito said, his voice growing stronger. “There’s something beneath the Flame—something even the warlords don’t know about. And I think... I think it’s calling to me.”

Borin scoffed. “Calling to you? Kaito, we’re kind of in a tight spot here.”

“No, he’s right,” Dorian said quietly, stepping closer to the runes. “I can feel it too. There’s something deeper in these ruins.”

Grushak grinned. “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s find it.”

The group moved cautiously through the chamber, following the glowing runes as they led deeper into the temple’s depths. The air grew colder, and the magic in the walls seemed to hum with a quiet intensity, as though something powerful was waiting for them.

As they descended, Kaito could feel the light inside him growing stronger, responding to whatever ancient force lay below. It wasn’t just the Primordial Flame—there was

something else, something older. Something that might be the key to escaping this trap and stopping Khaedir.

After what felt like hours of walking through narrow, crumbling passages, they finally reached a vast, open chamber. At the centre of the room stood a massive stone monolith, covered in glowing runes that pulsed with ancient magic. The air around it crackled with energy, and the very ground seemed to vibrate with the sheer force of it.

"This is it," Kaito said, stepping forward. "This is the source."

The others watched in silence as Kaito approached the monolith, the light inside him blazing brighter with every step. He could feel the power radiating from it, a power that seemed to resonate with the divine force within him.

He placed his hand on the stone, and immediately, a surge of energy shot through him. His vision blurred, and for a moment, he felt as though he was standing in two places at once—here, in the depths of the temple, and somewhere else, somewhere far older and far more powerful.

The light inside him exploded, filling the chamber with a blinding glow. The others shielded their eyes, but Kaito stood firm, his body shaking as the ancient magic fused with his own.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the light dimmed, and Kaito felt a new strength flood his body. He could feel it—the power of the temple, the connection to the Primordial Flame. But more than that, he felt something deeper, something hidden beneath the layers of ancient magic.

"I understand now," Kaito whispered, his voice filled with awe. "The light inside me... it's connected to this place. To the Flame. But there's more. A force that can balance the Flame. A power meant to protect it."

Seris frowned. "What are you saying?"

Kaito turned to face them, his eyes glowing faintly with divine light. "I can seal the Flame. I know how. And with this power, I can stop Khaedir."

Dorian's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

Kaito nodded. "We need to stop him before he reaches the capital. And this... this is our way out."

Without hesitation, Kaito raised his hand, and the runes on the monolith flared to life. The walls of the chamber trembled, and the stone above them cracked. The ancient magic responded to his call, and with a deafening roar, the collapsed ceiling began to shift, opening a path to the surface.

Kaito turned to his companions, a determined fire in his eyes. "Let's go save the capital."

34

The Siege of the Camp

The passageway Kaito had opened led them back to the surface with an explosion of light and stone, and they emerged into the cool, early evening air. The darkening sky above them was painted with the fading hues of sunset, but there was no peace to be found in the moment. The distant sound of marching armies and the thundering footsteps of war echoed through the valleys.

Kaito could feel it—the urgency pressing down on him. Warlord Khaedir was already on the move, heading straight for the capital. If they didn't catch up to him, the city would burn, and the Primordial Flame would be unleashed on all of Valkra. There wasn't a moment to waste.

But as they descended the steep hill toward the warlord's camp, Kaito's heart sank. The sprawling campsite, where Khaedir's forces had gathered, was swarming with soldiers, monsters, and siege engines—enough to slow them down or stop them entirely. Dark banners fluttered in the wind, and the air was thick with the smoke of cooking fires and the smell of blood and steel.

"They're expecting us," Dorian muttered grimly, his eyes narrowing as they took in the sheer scale of the warlord's forces below.

Grushak growled, his hand tightening on the hilt of his axe. "Good. Let them try to stop us."

Borin raised his hammer and spat on the ground. "That's a bloody lot of monsters down there. Khaedir left them here to slow us down."

Seris scanned the camp from their vantage point, her sharp eyes catching movement in the shadows. "He knows we'll try to follow. Those aren't just soldiers. He's left behind some of his strongest beasts to make sure we don't make it out of here alive."

Kaito's heart raced. From where they stood, he could see massive ogres, their skin thick and leathery, towering over the other soldiers as they patrolled the camp. Twisted, misshapen creatures with too many limbs and glowing red eyes lurked among the tents, their claws dragging across the dirt. And somewhere in the distance, the faint growls and roars of even larger monsters echoed through the air.

"We have to cut through them," Sylvara said, her bow already in hand. "If we try to go around, we'll lose too much time. The capital can't afford that."

Kaito nodded, the weight of the situation pressing down on him. They couldn't afford to waste any more time. Every second they delayed, Khaedir marched closer to the capital with the Primordial Flame.

"We'll have to fight our way through," Kaito said, his voice steady. "There's no other choice."

Grushak grinned, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "Finally. I've been itching for a real fight."

"I hope you're ready for one," Seris said, her voice cool as she checked her daggers. "Because once we're in there, it's going to get ugly fast."

Kaito took a deep breath, his hand tightening on the hilt of his glowing dagger. The divine light inside him pulsed, flaring to life in response to the danger ahead. It was time.

"Let's go."

With that, they descended the hill, moving swiftly and silently toward the outskirts of the camp. The low hum of activity filled the air as soldiers moved between tents, sharpening their weapons and preparing for the next march. The monsters, however, were less disciplined—some paced restlessly, growling and snarling, while others seemed to lurk in the shadows, waiting for the scent of blood.

Kaito led the way, his heart pounding as they reached the edge of the camp. He could feel the light inside him ready to burst, ready to protect his friends from the darkness that surrounded them.

“We go in hard and fast,” Kaito whispered to the group. “Take down as many as we can and keep moving. We can’t let them slow us down.”

Grushak’s grin widened. “Hard and fast. My kind of plan.”

With a signal, they moved as one. Grushak was the first to break from the shadows, charging into the camp with a roar that echoed across the battlefield. His axe swung in wide, devastating arcs, cleaving through the first line of soldiers like a force of nature.

Borin was right behind him, his hammer crashing into the ground with enough force to send shockwaves through the dirt, knocking soldiers off their feet. “For Valkra!” he bellowed, his voice carrying over the chaos.

Sylvara’s arrows flew through the air with deadly precision, each one finding its mark in the throats and hearts of the warlord’s soldiers. Seris darted through the fray, her daggers flashing as she took down targets with swift, lethal strikes.

Kaito felt the light surge through him as he charged into the battle, his glowing dagger slashing through the soldiers who stood in their way. The divine light burned through their armour, cutting them down like they were nothing. Every time

he struck, the light flared, pushing back the darkness that threatened to consume them.

But the real challenge came in the form of the monsters.

The first of the ogres charged toward Grushak, its massive fists raised to crush him. Grushak didn't even flinch. With a roar, he swung his axe, the blade biting deep into the ogre's thick hide. The creature howled in pain, but it wasn't enough to stop it. The ogre swung back, its fist connecting with Grushak's chest and sending him flying into a nearby tent.

"Grushak!" Kaito shouted, but the orc was already on his feet, shaking off the blow like it was nothing.

"I'm fine!" Grushak bellowed, his eyes blazing with fury. "This big bastard's mine!"

Borin rushed in to help, swinging his hammer into the ogre's knee, bringing the towering creature to the ground. The impact sent a shockwave through the camp, but the ogre wasn't done. It lashed out, its massive hand knocking Borin back before Grushak's axe came down once more, this time cleaving through its neck in a spray of blood.

Sylvara, meanwhile, was keeping the smaller monsters at bay, her arrows flying in rapid succession. But the twisted creatures with too many limbs were fast—faster than anything they had faced before. They moved with unnatural speed, their claws slashing through the air as they darted toward the group.

"Kaito!" Sylvara called out as one of the creatures lunged at her.

Kaito spun around just in time, his dagger glowing as he slashed through the creature's chest. The divine light exploded from the wound, burning the monster from the inside out. But for every one they killed, more seemed to

appear, crawling out of the shadows like nightmares brought to life.

"We can't keep this up," Seris muttered as she parried a strike from one of the soldiers. "There's too many of them!"

Kaito knew she was right. The monsters and soldiers were relentless, their sheer numbers threatening to overwhelm them. They had to find a way to push through—fast.

"Kaito!" Dorian shouted from the other side of the battlefield, his sword flashing as he fought off two soldiers at once. "We need to take down the leaders! They're the ones controlling the monsters!"

Kaito's eyes scanned the battlefield, searching for the leaders. And then he saw them—three figures standing at the far end of the camp, cloaked in dark armour and surrounded by auras of twisted magic. These were Khaedir's lieutenants, left behind to slow them down and ensure their failure.

"We take them out, the monsters will fall apart," Kaito said, his voice filled with determination.

Seris nodded, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "I'll handle the one on the left."

"I've got the middle one," Dorian said, already moving.

Kaito looked at Grushak and Borin. "You two take care of the big one."

Grushak grinned. "With pleasure."

As the group split off toward their targets, Kaito could feel the light inside him growing stronger. The divine energy flared, guiding him as he moved through the battlefield. His feet barely touched the ground as he sprinted toward the leader on the far right, his dagger glowing brighter with every step.

The leader turned to face him, his eyes burning with dark magic. "You're too late, boy," he snarled. "Khaedir will reach the capital, and when he does, Valkra will burn."

Kaito's eyes narrowed. "Not if I stop you first."

With a burst of speed, Kaito lunged forward, his dagger flashing as it met the leader's sword. The clash of light and dark magic sent a shockwave through the air, but Kaito didn't back down. He pushed forward, the divine light inside him blazing with intensity as he slashed at the leader's armour.

The leader let out a snarl of fury, but Kaito was faster. He ducked under the leader's next swing and drove his dagger deep into the man's chest. The light exploded from the wound, burning through the leader's body with a blinding flash.

The leader collapsed, his body disintegrating into ash as the dark magic that had sustained him unravelled.

Kaito didn't stop to catch his breath. He turned to see Seris and Dorian finishing off their targets, their attacks swift and lethal. Grushak and Borin had taken down the massive lieutenant, their combined strength overwhelming the dark magic that had protected him.

35

The Road to the Capital

The battlefield was finally quiet, save for the crackling of dying fires and the distant howls of retreating beasts. The dark energy that had once pulsed through Khaedir's camp faded into nothingness as the warlord's lieutenants lay defeated. Kaito and his companions stood among the wreckage, breathing heavily but triumphant. The camp had been a brutal gauntlet of soldiers and monsters, but they had fought their way through.

Yet, as the dust settled, the reality of their situation loomed large. The capital was still under threat. Khaedir, armed with the Primordial Flame, was marching toward it with the intent to burn everything in his path. The victory here felt fleeting—a temporary reprieve before the final storm.

"We did it," Sylvara said, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, her voice a mix of exhaustion and satisfaction. "But that was the easy part."

Grushak let out a laugh, though there was an edge to it. "That was easy? Remind me never to fight an ogre and twenty limbs of nightmares again if this is what you call easy."

Borin leaned on his hammer, wiping the sweat from his brow. "If that was easy, I'd hate to see what hard looks like."

Seris, ever the quick-witted rogue, smirked. "Hard? That'll be facing Khaedir himself. And trust me, Borin, you'll be missing the ogres when that happens."

Kaito listened to them banter, but his mind was already racing ahead, focused on what lay ahead. The capital—the heart of Valkra—was in danger, and Khaedir would unleash the

Primordial Flame the moment he reached it. They were running out of time.

"We don't have long," Kaito said, his voice cutting through the group's banter. "Khaedir's probably halfway to the capital by now. We need to get there before he does."

Dorian, who had been scanning the horizon, nodded in agreement. "If he reaches the capital with the Flame, it'll be chaos. We need to move quickly."

Grushak grunted. "Then let's move. No use standing around when the world's about to burn."

With that, the group gathered what little they had and set off. The journey to the capital would be long, but there was no time to rest. Every step felt like a race against the ticking clock of Khaedir's impending attack.

The road was rough and winding, cutting through jagged hills and dense forests. The air was thick with the smell of smoke, no doubt from the fires left in the wake of Khaedir's forces. As they walked, the distant sounds of conflict reached their ears—small skirmishes, likely between Khaedir's army and the last defenders of Valkra.

For a while, the group was silent, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Kaito's mind was racing with the weight of responsibility, the pressure of what they had to do next. The others, he suspected, were thinking much the same.

After a while, though, the silence grew too heavy, and Grushak, never one to brood for long, broke it.

"So, Borin," the orc said with a teasing grin, "what do you think they'll call us when this is all over? 'Heroes of Valkra' has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Borin snorted. "Heroes? After what we've been through, I'll be happy with a cold mug of ale and a hot bath."

Grushak laughed, his deep voice booming through the trees. "I'll drink to that. But let's be honest—we deserve more than just a pint. Maybe they'll throw a feast in our honour. You know, roast boar, barrels of mead, songs of our bravery... that kind of thing."

Seris rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "You're assuming we survive this. Ever think of what happens if we don't?"

"Don't spoil the mood, Seris," Grushak grumbled. "We'll survive. We always do."

"And if we don't," Sylvara added with a wry smile, "at least we'll die with a legend behind us. 'The Last Stand of the Misfit Heroes.'"

Dorian, who had been unusually quiet, chuckled softly. "Misfit heroes? That's the most accurate title I've heard yet."

Kaito smiled despite himself. For all the darkness that lay ahead, it was moments like these that reminded him why they had made it this far—because they had each other. They weren't just a group of strangers bound by a common goal anymore. They had become something more—friends, maybe even a family in some strange, chaotic way.

As they continued down the road, the banter shifted to lighter topics—Grushak and Borin debating who would drink more at the inevitable feast, Sylvara teasing Seris about her uncanny ability to disappear during difficult conversations, and Dorian's rare but sharp comments about how they were, against all odds, the most dysfunctional team he'd ever seen.

It was in these moments, Kaito realised, that their true strength lay. Each of them had their own burdens, their own

demons to face, but together, they made something stronger than they ever could alone.

As night began to fall, the group set up camp in a small clearing near the edge of a forest. The air was cool, and the distant glow of fires could still be seen far off in the direction of the capital. Kaito stared at the horizon, his heart heavy with the knowledge of what was coming.

Seris, sitting beside the fire, caught his gaze and raised an eyebrow. "You've been quiet, Kaito. What's on your mind?"

Kaito hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I'm just... thinking about what's going to happen when we get to the capital. Khaedir's army will be there, and he'll have the Primordial Flame. I don't know if we're ready for this."

Seris smiled, but it wasn't her usual sly smirk. There was something softer in it, something almost reassuring. "No one's ever ready for something like this. But you've done things most people wouldn't even dream of, Kaito. You'll figure it out. You always do."

Grushak, overhearing, grinned. "Listen to her, Kaito. You took down that giant flaming snake and cracked through a magical guardian. I'm pretty sure you'll be fine. Besides," he added, flexing his muscles, "you've got me."

Borin shook his head with a sigh. "If it comes down to it, just let Grushak charge in head first. Problem solved."

Sylvara snickered. "We'll be fine, Kaito. It's not just you against the world. You've got all of us."

Dorian, sitting across the fire, looked up, his expression serious but not without a hint of a smile. "They're right. You're not alone in this. We've fought beside you this far, and we'll keep fighting until it's done."

Kaito felt a warmth spread through him, not from the fire, but from their words. They believed in him, in each other. Despite the overwhelming odds, they were in this together.

"Thanks," Kaito said quietly, looking at each of them in turn. "I don't know how I would've made it this far without all of you."

"You wouldn't have," Seris said with a wink. "But lucky for you, we're all too stubborn to let you fail."

They all laughed, the tension of the past few days easing just for a moment. The fire crackled, and the stars began to peek through the canopy of trees above them.

For a while, they sat in silence, simply enjoying the peace of the night. But as the fire burned lower and the sky darkened, the weight of their mission settled back on their shoulders.

Tomorrow, they would reach the capital. Tomorrow, they would face Khaedir and the full force of his army.

"We should get some rest," Dorian said after a while, his voice quiet but firm. "We're going to need it."

One by one, they settled in for the night, the fire's light flickering softly as it dimmed. Kaito lay on his back, staring up at the stars, his mind racing with thoughts of the battle to come.

But even with the weight of the world pressing down on him, he felt a strange sense of calm. He wasn't alone. He had his friends—his family—with him.

36

Ashes of the Fallen

The morning came with a bitter chill, the air heavy with the smell of smoke carried from far-off fires. Kaito and his companions woke with grim determination, knowing what lay ahead. They packed their camp in silence, the easy camaraderie of the previous night replaced by the tense focus of warriors preparing for battle.

As the group made their way down the road, their path began to wind through familiar territory. The once green fields were now scorched, the land blackened by fire and the march of Khaedir's army. The closer they got to the capital, the more the destruction became apparent—rivers stained red, trees stripped of life, and the distant sound of war drums beating in rhythm with their footsteps.

Kaito walked at the front of the group, his eyes scanning the horizon. He knew they would have to pass through the village of Brightwater—one of the first places they had visited after forming their strange band of heroes. The thought of the small, cheerful village now filled him with dread. Brightwater had been full of life, its people kind and welcoming. He hoped, foolishly, that maybe it had been spared from Khaedir's wrath.

But as they approached the outskirts of the village, Kaito's heart sank.

The once vibrant town was now a ruin. The homes, which had once been filled with the warmth of hearthfires and the laughter of children, now lay in crumbled heaps. The marketplace, where vendors used to sell fresh bread and trinkets, was now little more than ash. The smell of burning wood and death clung to the air like a suffocating fog.

Brightwater had been ransacked.

"Gods," Sylvara whispered, her voice barely audible as they walked through the ruined village square. Her eyes swept over the destruction, lingering on the remnants of a small cart she had once bought herbs from. "It's all gone."

Grushak clenched his fists, his knuckles white against the handle of his axe. "Khaedir's work, no doubt. This is what he leaves in his wake—death and ruin."

Borin, normally the one to bring levity even in dire situations, was silent. His face was hard as he knelt down beside the remains of a home, running his fingers over the charred stone foundation. "These people never stood a chance."

Kaito felt a hollow ache in his chest as he moved toward the village centre. He remembered Brightwater as a place of hope, a place where they had found supplies, kindness, and a moment of respite during their journey. Seeing it now, reduced to nothing more than rubble, filled him with a deep, burning anger.

Seris, her sharp eyes scanning the wreckage, was the first to break the silence. "There's no sign of survivors."

Dorian, his jaw clenched, stepped forward, kicking aside a burnt plank of wood. "Khaedir doesn't leave survivors. He takes what he wants, and what he doesn't need, he burns to the ground."

Kaito's mind raced. This village wasn't just a casualty—it was a message. Khaedir wanted them to know what he was capable of, wanted to remind them that he wasn't just coming for the capital. He was coming for everything.

"We can't let him reach the capital," Kaito said, his voice tight with determination. "If he does, this—" He gestured to the

ruined village around them. "This is what will happen to the entire kingdom."

Grushak spat on the ground, his face set in a grim scowl. "Then we don't waste time mourning. We keep moving. For these people."

Seris nodded, though there was a strange, cold sadness in her eyes as she looked over the destruction. "We can't help them now, but we can make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else."

Kaito took a deep breath, forcing down the rage that was simmering in his chest. He turned to his companions, his voice steady but filled with resolve. "We'll make Khaedir pay for this."

Without another word, they set off again, leaving the ruins of Brightwater behind. The road stretched out ahead of them, leading ever closer to the capital and to the final confrontation with Khaedir. But the further they travelled, the more Kaito felt the weight of what they were about to face. This wasn't just a fight for survival—it was a fight for the future of the entire kingdom.

As they walked, the landscape became more desolate. Villages and farms that had once dotted the countryside were now nothing more than burnt husks, their fields scorched and barren. The war had swept through this land like a firestorm, leaving only destruction in its wake.

The group continued in silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts. The tension hung heavy between them, a shared understanding of the monumental task that lay ahead.

It wasn't until they were nearing the final stretch toward the capital that they encountered a rider—an exhausted messenger on a half-dead horse, galloping down the road toward them. The rider spotted them and pulled the horse to

a stop, breathing heavily, his face pale with fear and exhaustion.

“Are you from the capital?” Kaito asked, stepping forward, his heart racing as he sensed something was terribly wrong.

The rider shook his head, gasping for air as he tried to speak. “I bring news... from the battlefield.”

“Battlefield?” Dorian asked, his voice sharp with urgency. “What’s happened?”

The messenger’s eyes were wide, his voice trembling as he delivered the words that made Kaito’s blood run cold. “The king... the king is dead.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Kaito felt the ground tilt beneath him as the weight of the news hit him like a physical blow. The King of Valkra—the man who had held the kingdom together during these dark times—was dead.

“How?” Borin asked, his voice hoarse. “How did it happen?”

The rider swallowed hard, wiping the sweat from his brow. “He fell... on the battlefield. Fighting Khaedir’s forces near the capital. He fought valiantly, but... but they overwhelmed him. The city’s defenses are breaking. The capital is under siege.”

Seris muttered a curse under her breath, her eyes narrowing. “So Khaedir’s already reached the capital.”

Dorian’s face darkened. “This changes everything. Without the king, the people will be in chaos. Khaedir will use that to his advantage.”

Grushak growled, his hands tightening into fists. “Then we don’t stop. We push forward. We reach the capital, and we put an end to this before it’s too late.”

Kaito's heart was pounding in his chest, a mixture of grief and rage flooding through him. The king's death felt like a monumental loss—a loss that could tip the scales in Khaedir's favor. But they couldn't afford to lose focus now. There was still time, and they still had a chance to stop Khaedir before he unleashed the Primordial Flame on the capital.

"We can still stop this," Kaito said, his voice filled with determination. "The king may be gone, but we're still here. We can stop Khaedir before he destroys the capital."

Sylvara nodded, her face grim but resolute. "We have to. For the king, and for everyone else who's fallen because of him."

The messenger, still pale and shaking, looked at Kaito with desperation in his eyes. "Please... you must hurry. The city's defences are failing. The people... they don't have much time." Kaito placed a hand on the messenger's shoulder, his grip firm. "We'll get there. We'll stop Khaedir."

The messenger nodded, though his eyes were filled with doubt. He turned his horse and rode off toward the capital, leaving Kaito and his companions to face the daunting path ahead.

Kaito took a deep breath, his mind racing. The king was dead, and the capital was under siege, but they still had one chance—one final opportunity to stop Khaedir from unleashing the Primordial Flame.

"Let's move," Kaito said, his voice steady but filled with urgency. "We can't let Khaedir win." Without another word, they pushed forward, the darkening sky above them reflecting the heavy weight of the battle yet to come.

37

The Battle for the Capital

The sky above the capital of Valkra was a storm of dark clouds and ash, heavy with the promise of destruction. The once-great city was now a fortress on the verge of collapse, its walls battered and broken by Khaedir's relentless assault. From their vantage point, Kaito and his companions could see the fires burning within the city, plumes of smoke rising into the air like dark banners of despair.

Kaito's heart pounded as they made their final approach. The sounds of war echoed across the battlefield—the clash of steel, the distant cries of soldiers fighting for their lives, and the deep, rhythmic thud of siege engines battering the city's gates. The warlord's army stretched across the plains like a sea of darkness, their banners fluttering ominously in the wind.

"We need to flank them," Kaito said, his voice cutting through the tense silence. "If we hit them from behind, we can disrupt their forces and give the city a chance to regroup."

Grushak grinned, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. "I like the way you think. Hit them hard, hit them fast."

Borin nodded, hefting his hammer. "The longer we wait, the worse it gets for those poor souls in the city."

Seris, ever the strategist, scanned the battlefield. "There's a weak point on the far side—looks like they've pulled most of their forces to the front to break the gates. If we strike there, we can catch them off guard."

Sylvara's bow was already in her hand, her eyes narrowing as she took in the chaotic scene below. "And we help any soldiers we can along the way. We're going to need every able body in this fight."

Dorian, his expression dark but focused, spoke quietly. "Kaito, if we're going to make a difference, we need to be fast and precise. Once we're in, there's no turning back."

Kaito looked at each of them, feeling the weight of the moment pressing down on him. The capital was under siege, and the soldiers inside were fighting a losing battle. But they still had hope—they had him, his companions, and the divine light inside him. They had one last chance to turn the tide.

"Then let's do it," Kaito said, his voice steady. "For the king, for the capital, and for everyone who's counting on us."

With that, they moved as one, slipping down the hillside toward the warlord's encampment. The enemy soldiers were focused on the gates of the city, their attention drawn to the siege engines and the battering ram that pounded relentlessly against the walls. They didn't notice the small group approaching from behind.

Kaito led the charge, his dagger glowing with divine light as he sliced through the first line of enemy soldiers. The light burned through their armour, cutting them down with ease. Grushak followed close behind, his axe swinging in wide arcs as he cleaved through the warlord's forces with brutal efficiency.

"We're in!" Seris shouted as she darted between enemies, her daggers flashing as she took down targets with lethal precision.

Borin swung his hammer, knocking aside two soldiers at once with a single, thunderous blow. "Keep moving! We've got to push them back!"

Sylvara's arrows flew through the air, each one finding its mark in the chaos. She moved like a shadow, her movements fluid and precise, picking off the enemy soldiers who tried to regroup.

As they fought their way deeper into the enemy lines, they came across groups of Valkran soldiers—wounded, beaten down, but still fighting desperately to defend their home. The sight of Kaito and his companions cutting through the enemy like a ray of light in the darkness gave the soldiers hope.

"Kaito!" one of the wounded soldiers gasped, his eyes wide with disbelief as Kaito cut down the enemies around him. "It's... it's you."

Kaito knelt beside the soldier, his heart aching at the sight of so many wounded and broken men. "You're going to be okay," he said, his voice filled with determination. "We're here to help."

The soldier's eyes flickered with hope, his voice trembling. "The king... the king is dead. We... we thought all was lost."

Kaito placed a hand on the soldier's shoulder, his voice steady. "It's not over yet. We're going to stop Khaedir. We just need you to hold on a little longer."

Grushak, seeing the injured soldiers struggling to stand, let out a booming laugh. "You lot still breathing? Then you're still in this fight! Get up, grab your swords, and show these bastards what Valkra's made of!"

Borin, who had already helped one soldier to his feet, grinned. "The orc's right. As long as you can swing a blade, you've still got a chance."

The wounded soldiers, inspired by the sudden arrival of Kaito and his companions, began to rally. Some found the strength

to stand, while others picked up their weapons and joined the fight, emboldened by the hope that had seemed all but lost.

"They're rallying," Dorian said, his eyes scanning the battlefield. "But we need to keep the momentum going. If we push hard enough, we can break through their lines."

Kaito nodded, his heart pounding with a renewed sense of purpose. He turned to the soldiers, raising his glowing dagger high. "For Valkra! For the king!"

A roar erupted from the soldiers as they charged forward, Kaito and his companions leading the way. They carved a path through the warlord's forces, flanking the enemy and throwing their ranks into disarray. The warlord's soldiers, caught off guard by the sudden assault from behind, began to falter.

As they fought, Kaito could feel the divine light inside him burning brighter. Every time his dagger struck, it seemed to fill the battlefield with a sense of hope, as if the very air around them was pushing back against the darkness. The soldiers around him fought harder, their spirits lifted by the sight of their enemies falling before them.

Sylvara's arrows continued to rain down on the enemy, her movements graceful and deadly. "We're pushing them back!"

Seris darted through the chaos, her daggers cutting down soldiers with surgical precision. "They didn't expect this! We've got them on the run!"

Grushak let out a booming laugh as he cleaved through another group of soldiers. "Run, you cowards! Run!"

Borin, always at the front of the battle, swung his hammer with such force that it sent shockwaves through the ground. "We've got them!"

Kaito's heart swelled with hope as he watched the warlord's army begin to crumble under the pressure. The soldiers of Valkra were fighting with renewed strength, their morale lifted by the sudden shift in the battle.

But even as they pushed forward, Kaito knew the real challenge still lay ahead. Khaedir was out there, somewhere in the heart of the battlefield, wielding the power of the Primordial Flame. And every moment they spent fighting his army was another moment Khaedir marched closer to unleashing that power on the capital.

"We need to reach the front," Kaito said, his voice filled with urgency. "Khaedir's going to unleash the Flame. If we don't stop him now, it's over."

Dorian nodded, his face grim but determined. "Then we push through. No more holding back."

Grushak, his eyes gleaming with battle-fury, raised his axe. "Let's finish this."

With a final rallying cry, they charged toward the heart of the battlefield, cutting through the remaining soldiers with everything they had. The sound of battle surrounded them—shouts, the clang of steel, the thundering of hooves and siege engines—but Kaito's focus was clear.

They had one goal: stop Khaedir.

As they neared the front lines, the enemy's resistance grew fiercer. The warlord's elite soldiers, armed with enchanted weapons and clad in dark armour, stood between Kaito and the city. But even they couldn't hold back the momentum that had been built by Kaito's arrival.

The soldiers of Valkra, once on the brink of collapse, now fought with a sense of purpose. The sight of Kaito and his companions leading the charge had ignited something deep

within them—hope. The hope that they could still win, that they could still protect their city, even with the king gone.

“Khaedir’s forces are breaking!” Seris shouted as she cut down another soldier. “We’re almost there!”

Kaito’s heart pounded as they fought their way to the front of the battle. The city walls loomed ahead, battered but still standing, and beyond them, the flames of Khaedir’s army burned bright.

But Kaito wasn’t focused on the walls or the fires. His eyes were locked on a single figure in the distance—tall, imposing, and surrounded by a storm of dark magic.

Khaedir.

The warlord stood at the gates of the city, his massive sword raised high, the Primordial Flame burning in his eyes.

“This is it,” Kaito whispered, his grip tightening on his dagger. “It’s time.”

With one final surge of strength, they pushed forward, racing toward the warlord and the final battle for the fate of Valkra.

38

The Flame and the Light

The battlefield at the gates of the capital burned with the fury of war. Siege engines lay in splinters, their operators slain or scattered, while the battered walls of the city loomed behind Kaito and his companions, still standing but barely holding. Khaedir's army, once vast and unstoppable, had been pushed back, but now a dark storm of magic gathered around their leader, the warlord himself, standing tall before the shattered gates.

Khaedir's figure was a silhouette of power against the crimson sky, his armour black as midnight and crackling with energy from the Primordial Flame. His eyes glowed with a dark fire, and the ground beneath him smouldered with the heat of the ancient force he had unleashed. In his hand, his massive sword pulsed with the same energy, a weapon infused with the Flame's raw, destructive power.

Kaito felt the heat wash over him as they drew closer, a suffocating wave of fire and malice. His companions stood by his side, weapons ready, but he knew this battle would be unlike anything they had faced before. Khaedir was more than a warlord now—he was a conduit for the Flame itself.

As Kaito stepped forward, his divine light pulsing in response to the darkness emanating from Khaedir, the warlord turned his burning gaze on him. "You've come all this way to die, boy," Khaedir growled, his voice echoing with the power of the Flame. "Did you think you could stop me? I am the Flame's chosen! I will remake this world in fire and ash."

Kaito met Khaedir's gaze, his hand gripping his glowing dagger tightly. "I won't let you destroy this world," he said, his voice steady despite the fear gnawing at him. "The Flame doesn't belong to you. It's too dangerous."

Khaedir laughed, a cold, hollow sound that sent shivers down Kaito's spine. "Dangerous? Power is dangerous to those who fear it. But I have embraced it. Watch, and see what true power looks like."

With a roar, Khaedir raised his sword high, the dark flames swirling around him like a vortex. The ground beneath him cracked and split open, molten lava seeping up from the earth. And then, with a blast of energy so intense that it knocked Kaito and his companions back, the warlord slammed his sword into the ground.

The earth shook, and from the cracks in the ground, a monstrous form began to rise. At first, it was just a ripple of heat and flame, but then it grew—massive wings of fire unfurled, talons as large as a man's arm gouging the earth, and a head crowned with flames that roared with an inferno's fury. A dragon—born of fire and forged from the Primordial Flame itself—emerged from the molten cracks, its scales glowing like molten metal, its eyes burning with the same dark fire as Khaedir's.

The dragon let out a deafening roar that shook the very sky, and the heat from its breath turned the air around it into a shimmering haze.

"Khaedir has summoned the Flame Dragon," Seris said, her voice tight with fear. "We have to take it down!"

Grushak, ever the warrior, grinned despite the danger. "A dragon? Finally, a real challenge!"

But Kaito knew this wasn't just any dragon. This was a creature of pure destruction, summoned from the depths of

the Flame itself. They couldn't face it head-on—not without risking everything.

"Kaito," Dorian called out, his voice urgent as he deflected a wave of heat with his arcane shield. "We can't fight this thing the way we are. You're the only one who can stop it!"

Kaito could feel the truth of Dorian's words in his bones. The light inside him—the ancient power he had discovered below the temple—was the only force strong enough to counter the Flame. But using it would be risky. He wasn't sure if he had fully mastered it, and the power could consume him just as easily as it could defeat Khaedir.

The dragon roared again, sending a torrent of flame toward the group. Kaito barely managed to raise a shield of light in time, the heat scorching the earth around them.

"We need to distract it," Kaito shouted over the roar of the flames. "I'll deal with Khaedir!"

Grushak and Borin immediately charged toward the dragon, their weapons raised. Grushak's axe flashed as he swung it toward the dragon's massive leg, while Borin's hammer crashed into the earth, sending shockwaves that staggered the creature. Sylvara's arrows flew toward the dragon's fiery eyes, each one striking with deadly precision, but the dragon barely flinched, its body too massive, too powerful.

Seris darted between the dragon's massive limbs, her daggers slashing at the joints of its wings in an attempt to ground it. "We can't hold this thing forever, Kaito!"

Kaito's heart raced as he turned his focus back to Khaedir, who stood at the center of the destruction, his sword raised as the dragon's flames danced around him. The warlord's eyes were locked on Kaito, burning with fury and madness.

"You think your pathetic light can stand against the Flame?" Khaedir sneered, his voice dripping with contempt. "You are nothing compared to the power I wield."

Kaito felt the divine light inside him flare, a pulse of pure energy that surged through his veins. He could feel the power beneath the Flame, the ancient force connected to the temple's magic—the same force that had been calling to him since the beginning of his journey.

"I don't need to match your power," Kaito said, his voice filled with resolve. "I just need to end this."

With that, he raised his glowing dagger, the light within him blazing brighter than ever before. The divine energy surged through him, connecting him to the ancient power of the temple. He could feel the balance—the force that could contain the Flame.

Khaedir's eyes narrowed as he felt the shift in energy. "What are you—"

Before he could finish, Kaito unleashed the full force of the light, sending a beam of pure energy toward Khaedir. The warlord raised his sword, blocking the attack with a wall of fire, but the light didn't stop. It burned through the flames, pushing Khaedir back with every step.

Kaito's heart pounded as he poured everything he had into the attack. He could feel the strain on his body, the light burning through him with an intensity that threatened to overwhelm him. But he couldn't stop—not now.

Khaedir roared in fury, his sword crackling with dark energy as he swung it toward Kaito. The air between them exploded with fire and light, but Kaito didn't back down. He pushed harder, his glowing dagger cutting through the flames.

"Enough!" Khaedir bellowed, summoning the full power of the Flame. The fire dragon roared in response, its massive wings beating against the sky as it turned its attention back to Kaito.

The dragon's fiery maw opened wide, and a torrent of flame shot toward Kaito, but just as the fire was about to consume him, Kaito felt the light inside him surge to its peak. With a shout, he unleashed the full force of his newfound power.

A wave of brilliant light exploded from Kaito, a radiant barrier that deflected the dragon's flames and sent Khaedir stumbling back. The light enveloped the battlefield, pushing back the darkness and fire, filling the air with a warmth that cut through the heat of the Flame.

The dragon let out a final, ear-splitting roar as the light pierced through its fiery body, tearing it apart piece by piece. Its massive form began to disintegrate, the flames unravelling until nothing was left but embers floating on the wind.

Khaedir, now weakened and blinded by the light, staggered backward, his sword falling from his grasp.

"This is over, Khaedir!" Kaito shouted, his voice filled with the power of the light. "You've lost."

Khaedir snarled, his eyes wild with desperation. "No! I am the Flame! I am—"

Before he could finish, Kaito raised his dagger one last time, the divine light blazing brighter than the sun. He brought it down with a final strike, the blade piercing through Khaedir's chest.

The warlord's eyes widened in shock, the flames around him flickering and dying as the light consumed him. His body shuddered, and with one last gasp, he collapsed to the ground, the dark energy dissipating into the air.

For a moment, the battlefield was silent. The flames had been extinguished, the dragon defeated, and Khaedir lay motionless at Kaito's feet.

It was over.

Kaito stood there, breathing heavily, the light inside him slowly fading. His companions, battered and bloodied but alive, gathered around him, their faces filled with awe and relief.

"You did it," Seris said, her voice soft but filled with admiration. "You actually did it."

Grushak let out a deep, relieved laugh. "You just killed a flame dragon and a warlord in one go. Remind me never to get on your bad side, Kaito."

Borin grinned, his eyes gleaming with pride. "That was the stuff of legends, kid."

Kaito looked around at his friends, his heart swelling with gratitude. "We did it together."

The battle was over, but the task to rebuild The capital city of Valkra would soon begin.

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The First Orc King

The battlefield was quiet now, save for the occasional crackle of dying fires and the distant groans of wounded soldiers being tended to. The sky, once a raging inferno of Khaedir's dark magic and the flame dragon's fury, had cleared, revealing a pale blue horizon tinged with the soft hues of dawn. Kaito stood at the edge of the city gates, staring down at the ruined capital of Valkra. The walls were crumbling, homes were reduced to smouldering husks, and the bodies of soldiers and civilians alike were scattered across the city's streets.

Despite their victory over Khaedir, the weight of what lay ahead was crushing. The war was over, but the kingdom was in ruins. There was no king to lead the people. Chaos and uncertainty loomed, and without strong leadership, Valkra would soon fall into anarchy.

As Kaito and his companions made their way down from the battlefield, they were greeted by sombre faces. The soldiers who had survived were exhausted, their expressions vacant and unsure. Civilians, some of whom had only recently emerged from hiding, gathered around the city's entrance, looking to Kaito and his group with cautious hope.

Grushak, usually the loudest voice among them, for once, seemed at a loss for words. He glanced over at Kaito, a rare hint of concern flickering in his eyes. "This place... it's a wreck. Even with Khaedir gone, how are they supposed to rebuild?"

Borin shook his head, his voice tinged with sadness as he surveyed the devastation. "The king's dead, Khaedir's army has scattered, and most of their leaders have either been killed or fled. But without someone to rally them, without order, this kingdom's going to tear itself apart."

Kaito felt a heaviness in his chest. They had fought so hard to stop Khaedir, to save Valkra, but now that the battle was over, he realised just how fragile the kingdom had become. Without the king, the people were lost.

Sylvara, her voice soft but thoughtful, spoke up. "The people need a leader. They need someone who can guide them through this. If we leave now, they'll be left to fend for themselves."

Seris, who had been unusually quiet since the battle's end, finally spoke, her tone sharp but not without sympathy. "The council's gone, the nobles have either fled or been killed, and the capital's in chaos. If someone doesn't take control soon, everything we've fought for will fall apart."

Kaito stared at the crumbling city, his mind racing. He had never seen himself as a leader—he had barely adjusted to being an orc in this strange new world, let alone someone who could guide an entire kingdom. But as he looked at the faces of the people, the soldiers and civilians who now turned to him with hope in their eyes, he realised they needed something more than just a hero.

They needed a king.

"Kaito," Dorian's voice broke through Kaito's thoughts, his tone measured and calm, "you're the only one who can lead them now."

Kaito blinked, turning to face Dorian. "What are you talking about?"

Dorian met his gaze with quiet conviction. "You've been their beacon of hope since you arrived in this world. You've fought for them, protected them, and now... they're looking to you to lead them. The king is gone. There's no one else."

Seris crossed her arms, a knowing smirk playing at her lips. "He's right. You've already proven yourself. The soldiers followed you into battle without question, and the people are already starting to look to you for guidance. Whether you realise it or not, Kaito, you're the only one they trust."

Grushak let out a snort, though his tone was more amused than dismissive. "You'd be the first orc king in history. Not a bad title, eh?"

Kaito's heart pounded in his chest, his mind reeling at the thought. He had never imagined this. Becoming a paladin, yes. Fighting to prove that he was more than just an orc, more than what people saw on the surface—those were goals he had accepted. But a king?

"I'm not a ruler," Kaito said quietly, shaking his head. "I don't know anything about running a kingdom."

Borin chuckled, his tone warm and reassuring. "No one's expecting you to know everything. But you've got what counts, lad. Heart. Courage. And you've proven time and again that you'll put the needs of others before yourself. That's more than can be said for most kings."

Sylvara nodded, her voice gentle. "The people of Valkra need someone who understands what it means to fight for them. Someone who's willing to get their hands dirty and do what's necessary to rebuild. You've already shown you can do that."

Seris leaned against a crumbling wall, her eyes glinting with a mixture of mischief and sincerity. "Besides, it'll be fun watching you try to deal with all the noble nonsense. They won't know what hit them."

Kaito couldn't help but laugh, though the weight of the decision still pressed heavily on him. "I don't know if I'm ready for this."

Dorian stepped forward, placing a hand on Kaito's shoulder. "No one ever is. But the people of Valkra need you. If you don't step up, someone else will—someone who may not have their best interests at heart."

Kaito looked around at his friends—his family, really. They had been through so much together, and yet they still believed in him. They believed he could do this, even if he wasn't so sure himself.

And then he looked at the people. The soldiers who had fought alongside him, the civilians who had survived Khaedir's assault. They were watching him, waiting, hoping. He could see it in their eyes—they needed him to be more than just the hero who had slain a warlord. They needed him to lead them through the darkness.

With a deep breath, Kaito squared his shoulders, his mind settling into a quiet resolve. Maybe he didn't know everything about ruling a kingdom. But he knew one thing—he wouldn't let these people down. He had come to this world as a stranger, an outsider, but now, this was his home. And it needed him.

"I'll do it," Kaito said, his voice firm. "I'll lead them."

There was a moment of silence, and then a ripple of approval passed through his companions.

Grushak slapped him on the back with a hearty laugh. "That's the spirit! King Kaito of Valkra—has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Borin nodded, grinning. "You've got my support, lad. I'll stick around and make sure you don't get too caught up in all that royal nonsense."

Sylvara smiled warmly. "You'll do great, Kaito. And you won't be doing it alone."

Seris tilted her head, her smirk returning. "Just don't expect me to start calling you 'Your Majesty.'"

Kaito rolled his eyes, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Dorian's voice cut through the light banter, his tone quiet but serious. "The people will follow you, Kaito. You've given them hope. And that's what they need now more than ever."

Taking a deep breath, Kaito turned to face the gathered soldiers and citizens. He could feel their eyes on him, waiting for him to speak. His heart pounded, but he knew what he had to say.

He stepped forward, his voice steady but filled with emotion. "I came to this world as a stranger—an outsider. But over time, I've fought alongside you. I've seen your strength, your courage, and your resilience. We've faced unimaginable darkness together, and we've come out on the other side."

The crowd listened intently, their eyes filled with hope and uncertainty.

"The king may be gone," Kaito continued, "but this kingdom isn't. It's not about one man—it's about all of us. We're going to rebuild this city, this kingdom, and make it stronger than ever. And I'll stand with you every step of the way."

A murmur spread through the crowd, soldiers exchanging glances and civilians whispering to one another.

"I don't have all the answers," Kaito admitted, his voice softening. "But I promise you this: I'll fight for you. I'll fight for this kingdom. And together, we'll rise from these ashes."

A cheer rose from the soldiers, tentative at first, but then it grew louder, spreading through the crowd like wildfire. The people of Valkra, weary and broken, were finding hope again. And Kaito stood at the centre of it, not just as a warrior, but as their leader.

As the cheers grew, Kaito felt the weight of the crown settling on his shoulders—not a physical crown, but the responsibility that came with it. He wasn't just a boy from another world anymore. He was Kaito, the first orc king of Valkra.

And his story would be known throughout the world as the ruler who united the war torn lands of Valkra, and his legend as the boy who wanted become a paladin but came to rule as the first orc king in history!

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A New Dawn

The capital of Valkra had been a city on the edge of ruin, but in the weeks that followed Khaedir's defeat, a quiet strength began to stir among its people. The fires of war had been extinguished, the siege engines lay broken at the city gates, and the black banners of the warlord's forces had been torn down, replaced with the colours of Valkra. The scars of battle still remained—crumbling walls, charred buildings, and shattered streets—but amidst the destruction, there was something new.

Hope.

Kaito stood on the balcony of the newly restored palace, gazing out at the city below. The streets were alive with activity—soldiers helping to rebuild homes, merchants setting up makeshift markets, and children running through the streets as if the horrors of war were already fading into memory. The people of Valkra had begun the long, hard process of rebuilding, and though the journey ahead was uncertain, the kingdom was already healing.

Behind him, Kaito's companions lounged around a grand table, enjoying a rare moment of peace. The grand hall was bathed in golden sunlight, the windows open to let in the crisp morning air. The atmosphere was light, filled with the banter and laughter of a group that had faced death together and survived.

"So, King Kaito," Grushak said, leaning back in his chair with a grin, "how does it feel to be the first orc king in history? Are you enjoying your new shiny throne?"

Kaito turned, smiling as he approached the table. "I'm not sure if I'm cut out for the whole 'king' thing, to be honest. There's no manual for how to rule a kingdom that's been nearly destroyed by war."

Borin, taking a swig from a tankard, laughed heartily. "You've done just fine so far, lad. You've got the people on your side, and that's more important than any royal lineage."

Sylvara, sitting with her legs crossed and her bow resting nearby, nodded in agreement. "The people trust you, Kaito. They believe in you because you've fought for them. That's what makes a good ruler."

Seris, who had her feet propped up on the table, smirked. "Besides, you've already survived a giant flame dragon and an army of twisted monsters. I think you can handle a few political squabbles."

Kaito chuckled, though there was still a hint of unease in his expression. "Maybe, but there's more to ruling than just surviving. There's rebuilding, uniting the people, and figuring out how to turn this broken kingdom into something stronger."

Dorian, ever the calm and pragmatic one, spoke up. "You won't have to do it alone. We've been through too much to just leave you here to figure it all out by yourself."

Kaito felt a wave of gratitude wash over him. His friends—his family—had stuck by him through everything. They had fought together, bled together, and now they were rebuilding together. It wasn't just him carrying the burden of leadership. They were all in this together.

Grushak, always quick to bring levity, grinned and leaned forward. "So, about this 'empire' you're going to build. What's the plan? You're going to unite all these broken lands and crown yourself Emperor Kaito?"

Kaito raised an eyebrow, though he couldn't help but smile at the orc's enthusiasm. "Empire? I'm just trying to keep Valkra from falling apart."

"Come on, Kaito," Borin said, slapping the table with a grin. "Think bigger! Valkra's just the start. Once we get things back on track here, you'll have other war-torn regions looking to you for leadership. We could unite the whole land—bring peace to all of it."

Sylvara nodded, her eyes thoughtful. "He's right. There are still villages and towns suffering from Khaedir's rampage. Some are still being ruled by warlords or struggling to rebuild. If we unite them, we could create something better—stronger."

Seris added, her tone lighter but sincere. "And think of all the adventures we'll have along the way. You can't seriously expect us to sit around and listen to royal advisors all day. We need excitement."

Kaito laughed, though the idea began to take root in his mind. Uniting Valkra—restoring not just the kingdom, but the lands beyond—was a daunting task, but it was one that could bring true peace. After all the destruction they had seen, maybe there was a way to rebuild something better, something that could stand the test of time.

"An empire, huh?" Kaito mused, looking out over the city again. "It sounds ambitious."

Grushak pounded the table with a booming laugh. "Ambition is what got us this far! You've got the strength of a king, Kaito. Why not an emperor?"

Dorian smiled slightly, his tone serious but encouraging. "If anyone can do it, it's you. You've proven that you're more than just a warrior. You've earned the people's respect, and they'll follow you."

Sylvara's eyes gleamed with purpose. "We've seen what happens when power falls into the wrong hands. You could build something that lasts, something that protects people from the kind of darkness we just fought."

Seris twirled one of her daggers, her smirk returning. "And, hey, think of the stories. 'Emperor Kaito and his band of misfit heroes.' Sounds like something worth sticking around for."

Borin raised his tankard. "To Emperor Kaito! May his reign be filled with peace, prosperity, and plenty of good ale!"

Grushak raised his own mug, laughing. "And may we fight many more battles, for the glory of Valkra!"

Kaito shook his head, smiling despite himself as his friends toasted him. The idea of uniting Valkra—and possibly more—seemed impossible just weeks ago, but now, with his companions by his side, he felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe they really could rebuild not just the kingdom, but the entire land. Maybe they could bring peace where there had only been war.

As the laughter and banter continued around the table, Kaito's thoughts drifted to what lay ahead. The battles they had fought were just the beginning. There were still warlords scattered across the land, remnants of Khaedir's forces causing chaos, and regions that had been devastated by years of conflict. But now, they had a chance—a real chance—to change things for the better.

Kaito's gaze drifted back to the city below. The people were working tirelessly to rebuild their homes, their lives. But they were no longer doing it in fear. There was hope in their eyes,

and for the first time in a long time, they had something to believe in.

He took a deep breath, feeling the weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders once more, but this time, it didn't feel so heavy. He wasn't alone. His friends—his family—were with him, and together, they would face whatever challenges lay ahead.

Kaito turned back to his companions, his smile widening as he raised his glass. "To Valkra. To all of us. And to whatever comes next."

The group cheered, their voices filled with joy and camaraderie. It was a moment of peace, a moment of triumph after everything they had been through. But it was also a moment of anticipation—a moment where they knew their journey was far from over.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, casting golden light over the city and the people below, Kaito felt a sense of purpose settle within him. This was only the beginning. Together, they would rebuild, restore, and unite Valkra. They would face the challenges ahead with strength, hope, and unwavering determination.

And in time, perhaps they would build something even greater—a legacy that would last for generations.

With his friends by his side and the people of Valkra behind him, Kaito was ready for whatever came next.

The End... For Now.