

ACTUS



MY BEST FRIEND IS AN

# ELDRITCH HORROR

BOOK SIX: REALMBREAKER



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REALMBREAKER  
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# A BRIEF REFRESHER

After returning from the Void, Damien decides that he clearly hasn't caused enough chaos and decides it's a great idea to go traipsing over to the one school that hates him even more than Blackmist does—Mountain Hall. Someone's been messing with his friends, and he's never taken too kindly to that.

He's got some new magic to mess around with and is getting stronger by the day, which was the perfect mix for the arrogant pricks that made Mountain Hall their home. Damien also got to meet a few people that he didn't completely hate, including Quinlan's sister and Delph's ex-student turned Mountain Hall professor, Kat.

He spends a little while kicking the crap out of people who definitely deserve it, then remembers that spending time with Sylph is way more interesting than bullying dicks. So, after getting a little stronger and

overcoming the Void—for the time being—Damien sets off to find Sylph, certain that she's been training just as hard as he has.

Sylph, of course, has been hard at work playing matchmaker for poor Yui, who can't seem to find the right man for her. Why Yui thought Sylph—who barely knew that men and women were different before she met Damien—would be a good matchmaker is a question that neither the Void nor the Corruption could answer, but at least as far as things have gone, it looks like she didn't completely butcher it.

Unfortunately for all of them, Second isn't content to let everyone keep sitting back and handling their own problems. He's an egotistical bugger that prefers to be the center of attention, and the war between the Void and the Corruption is prepared to reach its peak—the question is if anything will be left when it's over.

Everything seems to be centered right around Damien and Sylph, who have stuck their noses into a few too many problems, and now they're going to have to find a way to take down the greatest threat to the Cycle and keep the Void from destroying the world in the process.

I just hope there are enough goats left over after this whole debacle that I can have something to entertain myself with.

— Henry

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# CHAPTER

# ONE

Once they got back to Kingsfront, Damien and Sylph each took a turn in the shower to heal their wounds from the fight before spending the rest of the day relaxing. Henry set off that night to scour Kingsfront's grounds for any signs of goats—which Damien suspected he was actually bothering Yui, but that wasn't his problem.

The following morning, after getting ready for the day, the two of them paused at the door.

"You've got the first half of the day," Damien reminded Sylph. "What are we doing."

Sylph thought for a few moments. Her nose scrunched, and she crossed her arms. "I— Well, this is awkward. I had a bunch of ideas, but I can't remember a single one of them. I feel like we've kind of done most of the things we normally do."

"Eating food and fighting?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"That's true," Damien muttered. "Man, we're kind of boring. But what else is there even to do?"

"If I knew, do you think we'd be sitting here talking about it?"

"Fair point."

They both leaned against the wall, thinking.

"Do we need another door? Or another kitchen?" Sylph asked.

"Probably not. Maybe some other form of appliance?"

Sylph started to nod, then paused. "Wait, that's no good. We'd have to drag anything we bought all the way back to Blackmist. I was about to

suggest trying out seeing what we can get with our contribution points, but that'll wait until we actually get back."

"Oh, yeah. Better to save that one, then," Damien said, rubbing his chin.  
"Hmm. What about finding someone to spar against?"

"Not exactly a date."

"Also a good point."

"We could go hunt the Corruption?" Sylph offered weakly.

"That's even less of a date than my suggestion was."

"I mean, it would just be the two of us."

"That *is* true," Damien admitted. "But it kind of feels like a chore, no?  
Let's put a pin in it. Not the worst idea we've had."

Sylph nodded. "But certainly not the best. There's always watching *other* people spar, but that just feels like a more boring version of sparring ourselves."

"What about breakfast?" Damien asked.

"That's food."

Damien shrugged. "Are you telling me you don't want waffles?"

"No," Sylph replied. "Breakfast it is."

And so it was. Sylph picked out a local restaurant, and the two of them sat down in the small veranda outside the building. Damien, as usual, ordered pancakes, while Sylph ordered waffles. The two of them spent the next several hours at the table, going over what they'd done over the past month or so.

Damien's explanation was considerably shorter than Sylph's, as the main things he'd done were improving skills he already had. Henry forbade him from telling Sylph anything about his new Full Manifestation until he could show her himself, which meant Damien ran out fairly quickly.

Sylph had a little more to talk about as her classes were actually fairly useful. Her sensing capabilities had increased by leaps and bounds from her artifact seeking class, not to mention the massive growth she'd earned in her control over her Corrupted abilities. She finished the story off with the full retelling of Yui's request, which ended in both of them doubled over, snickering.

"Planes, it sounds like you really went through it. I can't believe you just...stalked a bunch of nobles."

"Not like there were many other ways to do it without getting myself more involved than I really wanted to be," Sylph said with a grimace. "At

least it seems to have worked out. Somehow.”

“Carson does seem like a good match for her, although who knows how he’ll hold up against public scrutiny,” Damien said. “Yui won’t be able to hide things for long. For both of their sakes, I hope things work out. It just won’t be easy.”

“Not many things that are worth it are.”

Damien blinked. “That sounded pretty deep. Quoting someone?”

Sylph blushed. “Uh, it might have been in one of Henry’s books.”

Damien rolled his eyes. “Are they actually that good? I’m starting to wonder if I’m missing out.”

“They’re entertaining, I guess. I don’t know. I just never really got a chance to read things like that when I was younger. It’s a nice change of pace every once and a while. I certainly wouldn’t say they’re something I’d go around bragging I read to most people.”

“Maybe I’ll ask Henry for a recommendation at some point,” Damien said. “Then again, I’ll probably regret it.”

“Probably.”

She glanced down at their plates, then up at the growing lunch crowd gathering around them. The sun had risen and traveled through the sky while they’d talked, and it was already starting to push into midday.

“I think we’re just about halfway through the day,” Sylph observed. “That means it’s time to swap.”

“Ah, crap,” Damien said. “I— Uh, food was my only idea.”

“Are you hungry again?”

“Not really,” Damien said, sinking down in his chair. “Shoot. I got so caught up talking that I forgot to think of something myself.”

They sat for a few more moments, once again stuck brainstorming.

“What about the menagerie?” Sylph said, breaking the silence.

“Menagerie?” Damien asked.

“It’s a collection of a bunch of rare monsters,” Sylph said. “Kingsfront has mages try to capture rarer and some dangerous species, and they contain them in runed cages so they can be studied.”

“If they’re not dangerous, why are they in runed cages?”

“Maybe I should change that to *less* dangerous,” Sylph corrected. “Are you really worried about the strength of a monster when we’re going up against the Void and the Corruption?”

“No,” Damien said. “Just curious. Works for me. Lead the way.”

They rose and headed out of the restaurant, Sylph at the lead.

“It occurs to me that you ended up deciding what we do during my half of the day, and I chose what we did during your half,” Damien said with a chuckle. “Did you just forget about the menagerie when it was your turn?”

“All works out in the end, I guess,” Sylph said. “And yeah. I only overheard some students talking about it a few weeks back, but I remember where it was. It just wasn’t on my mind, I guess.”

Sylph led him up to a large, open roofed building with a small line at the front. Two bored-looking mages sat at the front, where a small line of students had formed. Damien and Sylph joined it, and it didn’t take long before they were granted entrance.

The menagerie was considerably larger than it had appeared. It had five floors in total, but four of them were underground. Monsters of every type, many of which Damien had only read about in books, sat within large cages.

They spent the rest of the day wandering through the large zoo. By the time it was done, Damien was equal parts exhausted and more relaxed than he had been in weeks. He didn’t have to ask Sylph to know that she felt the same.

The two of them returned to her room and flopped into bed, spent but satisfied.

---

“Is there anything else you need to get done in Kingsfront?” Damien asked the next morning. “I’m thinking about moving on to Blackmist shortly. I want to get things set up for Xil and Alina, and Whisp is pretty unpredictable.”

“Not really,” Sylph replied. “I’ve done what Yui asked of me, and I’ve learned most of what I think I’m going to from the class I was enrolled in, considering they kicked me out of it.”

“You’ll come back to Blackmist with me, then?”

“What else did you think I would do?” Sylph snickered. “Get completely attached to Kingsfront and stay here? I’ll give it to them, they’ve got some good teachers, but nothing is going to replace that asshole, Delph.”

“Can’t agree more,” Damien said. “Just never tell him that. His ego is big enough already. Kat wasn’t a bad replacement, but she lacked a bit of his—”

“Pent up hatred and complete disregard for human life?”

“Yeah, that. Also his addiction to pranks, but I think that was a welcome change,” Damien said with a shudder.

Sylph nodded. “If I ever see another stuffed animal, I’m going to put a dagger through it.”

“I still have flashbacks whenever I step on a soft carpet.”

“Let’s not bring that back up. I’ve only barely managed to scrub it from my mind.”

“Yeah, I’m regretting it already. I suppose we should tell Yui before we head off, right?”

“Probably for the best. She might end up sending Gaves after us if we don’t,” Sylph said, checking one of her daggers and sliding it into its sheath at her hip. “I’m ready when you are. I didn’t bring much.”

“Not even a toothbrush?”

Sylph’s cheeks reddened. “No. I remembered that.”

Henry slipped out of Damien’s shadow with a yawn. “Are we going yet? You’ve been standing around here for ages.”

“It’s been a minute or two at most,” Damien said defensively. “And what’s your hurry?”

“What? No hurry,” Henry said. “By the way, did you know that Kingsfront *did* have goats? It took me a while to find them.”

“Did?” Damien’s eyes narrowed.

“Hey, we’re leaving, right? No harm done.”

“Might be better to move quickly,” Damien said wearily. “I’ll let Yui know. It’ll be faster than you going as well. Give me a moment.”

He peered out of the window and Warp Stepped up, grabbing onto the windowsill ledge and knocking on it. A moment later, Yui’s face appeared behind the glass, her eyes narrow. She opened the window, letting Damien in.

“You really need to find a better way to visit. I’ve got a door, you know.”

“Won’t be a concern pretty soon,” Damien said with a shrug. “Sylph and I are heading back to Blackmist. We’ve pretty much finished up everything we needed to do here.”

“Can’t say I didn’t see that coming,” Yui said. “Although I do have to wonder what you actually needed to get done here. Did you actually do anything other than spar and go on a few dates?”

“No comment,” Damien replied. “Don’t complain too much. Where’s Carson?”

“In his room. It’s not like he’s going to stay in mine constantly. That would be weird,” Yui said. “Not everybody lives in a hole in the wall, Damien.”

Damien shrugged. “I like our hole in the wall. It’s comfy. Nonetheless, I trust you don’t need anything else before we head off?”

“Not that I can think of. It won’t be long before we run into each other again either way,” Yui said. “Given the whole situation with the Corruption, I’d imagine things will start going downhill pretty quickly, and the schools are going to have to band together to deal with it.”

“Probably,” Damien said, his mood darkening. “Hopefully, our next meeting is under better conditions than that.”

“I hope so, too,” Yui said, but she didn’t sound convinced. “Good luck with whatever it is that you’re going to do at Blackmist. Try not to injure too many people.”

Damien stepped out of the window, then paused and glanced back at the princess. “Why is it that everyone assumes I’m just going to attack people everywhere I go?”

“Have you gone anywhere without attacking people?”

“I will once again elect not to provide a comment,” Damien said. He slipped out of the window and dropped, Warp Stepping once he spotted Sylph’s window.

“All done,” Damien said. “Shall we?”

---

They left Kingsfront through the portal courtyard and arrived in Blackmist’s obsidian arrival grounds after a gut-wrenching trip.

It was strange to be back at Blackmist. Nothing had changed about the campus, of course, but it still felt slightly foreign. A thin stream of students and teachers came and went from the portals, and he and Sylph quickly set off to avoid blocking the path.

Damien was tempted to check their room out but, instead, he extended his senses as far as he could, feeling for Whisp. It was difficult to find a specific person in such a crowded area, but the dean was strong enough that she wasn't a difficult target.

He wasn't particularly surprised when his senses brushed across hers just a few minutes down the road—in a tavern.

“Found Whisp?” Sylph asked when he opened his eyes. “She’s in the Rusty Cauldron.”

“Damn, you’re a lot faster than I am at this,” Damien said.

“I did take an entire class on it. I’d hope I’m a little better. Human is pretty good at helping me as well.” They set off down the road, making for the tavern.

“Ah, lucky. Henry is completely useless with that kind of thing now,” Damien said. Henry gave an undignified grunt from his shadows.

“And whose fault is that?” Henry queried. “Because I can think of a single little meddling human spark inside me, and I don’t think I was the original owner.”

*Stop complaining. We both know you’re better off with it than without it.*

Henry gave him the mental equivalent of an eyeroll and fell silent. Damien and Sylph arrived at the entrance of the Rusty Cauldron, pausing before a pair of large wooden double doors.

Old carvings ran along the wood, but they looked to be purely decorative. At some point, they’d probably been colored as well, but everything had faded away in sunlight and age. The smell of spirits was so strong that it singed the hairs in Damien’s nose.

He grimaced as he pushed the doors open. “When was the last time you think students came here?”

“Probably when they failed one of their exams,” Sylph replied. “I don’t understand why anyone would voluntarily impair themselves.”

“Maybe you can ask Whisp,” Damien suggested. His senses pulled his gaze up to the second floor of the old building. A stairwell led up to a shut door, where a waiter in a ruffled suit leaned against the wall, reading a book.

Damien and Sylph ascended the stairs, drawing an annoyed glance from him as they reached the top.

“Are you old enough to be here?” he asked.

“Social visit,” Damien explained, nodding to the door. “We’re here to see Whisp.”

“She’s not here,” the waiter said promptly. “Go check her offices.”

“I’m quite certain she is,” Damien replied. “I can sense her in the room on the other side of that door. Don’t worry, I’m sure she already knows we’re here. I’d imagine she told you to tell people she isn’t.”

The waiter glanced from Damien to the door, then sighed. “I’ll see if she’s willing to talk.”

## CHAPTER

# TWO

He stepped toward the door, raising a hand to grab the handle. Before he could, it swung open to reveal Whisp, her hair frazzled and a large cup of red wine in her hand. She glared at him, then sighed.

“My *favorite* two students. I don’t suppose you’re here to sample wine?”

“Afraid not,” Damien said. “I see you’re doing well, Dean.”

“Don’t get snarky with me. Come in, so I can get rid of you faster.”

Damien and Sylph walked into the room, and Whisp flicked a hand, slamming it shut behind them. The room had a small wooden table with four chairs arranged around it. Bottles of wine were piled on top of it, only around half of them unopened.

“So? What do you want?” Whisp asked, flopping down into her chair and leaning back to kick her legs up on the table. She took a long drink from her cup, nearly draining the entire thing. “I was enjoying the peace and quiet while you were gone. Has the transfer ended already?”

“We decided we’d learned everything we were going to,” Sylph said. “So, we came back early.”

“Since when do students decide when they know everything there is to know? I’m pretty sure that was the teacher’s job,” Whisp said, narrowing her eyes.

“My professor agreed with me,” Damien said with a shrug.

“And mine said the class had taught me everything it was going to,” Sylph added. “There was no point staying at Kingsfront any longer.”

“Lovely. The only two students who actually *like* Blackmist,” Whisp said. She grabbed another bottle of wine and refilled her drink. Damien was

pretty sure it was a completely different type than the one that still currently filled around a quarter of her cup, but he didn't comment on it.

"A lot of people like Blackmist," Damien said. "And especially after going to Mountain Hall, I think it's a pretty good school. Most of the time."

Whisp grunted. "Sure. So, why'd you come bother me? I speak with Delph, you know. I'm well aware how wrapped up both of you are with the Corruption, even if he won't tell me why. Considering the situation we're all in, it's not like I'm going to really care what you're doing. So why report back to me?"

Damien cleared his throat. "Ah...I had a question."

Whisp took a sip of her wine. She set the cup down on the table and shifted to sit properly in her chair before leaning forward. "You want something."

"That's one way to put it."

"Did you kill anyone?"

"No. Why does everyone always assume I've done something terrible?"

"Because you're a menace," Whisp replied. "And we both know it. We don't need to have this conversation again—I don't care. Jayce was a waste of space and got what he had coming. I'm not holding it over you, and nobody's going to look into it. I've taken care of that situation, so there's no reason to pussyfoot around it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Damien said, keeping his face expressionless.

"Sure you don't." Whisp rubbed her forehead and sighed. "Just tell me what you did and what you need."

"When I was at Mountain Hall, I defeated some of their students in a fight. Because of my actions, one of them was removed from the school. She's shown to be more capable than Mountain Hall believed, but she needs a new Mage College. I was hoping she could come here."

"You nabbed a student from those pricks?" Whisp burst into laughter. "Done, if only to piss their dean off. Oh, man, I can't wait to see the look on his face."

"Two students," Damien corrected. "I also freed one from a brick of crystal. She's bound to a Deathwight, but it seems to be a decent companion, all things considered."

"A Deathwight? Curious. She's got it under control?"

“As far as we can tell. It’s Quinlan’s sister,” Damien said. “Quinlan is—”

“I know who the top student at Mountain Hall is,” Whisp interrupted. “You stole her sister?”

“I wouldn’t exactly put it that way. We’re friends.”

“Close enough,” Whisp said, rolling her eyes. “Don’t care about the reason. I can get two students added to Blackmist with no difficulty. Particularly if they’ve been stolen out from Mountain Hall’s nose. Is that all?”

“Uh... Oh, Kat is probably coming to Blackmist as well,” Damien said.

Whisp paused. “Who?”

“Kat. She’s an instructor at Mountain Hall. She’s looking for Delph,” Damien explained. “I think she probably sent in the paperwork or something to get a temporary transfer over here. I don’t know how that part works.”

“Shit,” Whisp said. “That’s probably not good, but I’m going to pretend like it’s not my problem. I don’t read the paperwork. I’ve got people that do that for me, and I’m sure one of those idiot paper-pushers have already okayed it. Oh, well.”

“Do you know her?” Sylph asked. “Should we be worried?”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Whisp said, waving her hand dismissively and draining her cup of wine. “Have you broken anything or otherwise somehow dragged us into any other problems?”

“Nothing I can think of right now,” Damien said.

“Maybe there really are gods,” Whisp said. “Then, get lost. I haven’t finished my lunch.”

Damien and Sylph glanced at the pile of bottles on the table.

“That can’t be healthy,” Sylph said.

“If I wanted your opinion, I would have asked,” Whisp said. “Leave.”

They left. The waiter gave them a wide-eyed stare as they walked out of the Rusty Cauldron, but he didn’t say anything. Damien got the feeling Whisp probably paid them pretty well to keep silent about, well, everything.

“Man, she’s going to start putting up signs in her bedroom pretty soon,” Henry said, emerging from Damien’s shadow to float by his shoulders. “Pretty wooden ones with swirly handwriting.”

“Where did you even see any of those?” Damien asked.

“Your mom had one in her wine cupboard.”

“Ah,” Damien said, shaking his head. After a quick, wordless communication, they set off toward their room at the top of the mountain. “Oh, well. At least this went a lot better than I thought. I fully expected to have to argue with Whisp in favor of letting them in.”

“I guess she just likes pissing off the other schools even more than she dislikes doing any actual work.” Sylph laughed. “I wonder if Quinlan will join us as well.”

“It’s possible, but I’ll let her figure that out. She’s basically graduated,” Damien said. “I’m sure Blackmist would find a spot for her somewhere if she wanted. And to be honest, the more power we have in our corner, the better. The Corruption has been still for too long.”

Sylph’s grin faded and she nodded. “Yeah. I thought so. I assume Delph and Dredd have still been hunting it, but I don’t think Second is going to just let us get away with training constantly.”

“Probably not,” Damien agreed grimly. They reached their room a short while later, and they headed inside. He’d expected it to smell stale but, because the door didn’t seal very well with the rocky ground, the air was surprisingly fresh.

*Can’t complain, I guess. Hidden benefit.*

“Don’t pass your shitty door installation job off as if you planned anything,” Henry said, prodding him with a tentacle.

“Hey, always look on the brighter side of life,” Damien said with a shrug.

“Who said that? Sounds like a quote,” Henry said.

“I-I’m not sure. Can’t remember,” Damien replied after a moment of digging through his head. “It did feel like a quote, though. Maybe I’m just a fountain of meaningful and inspirational knowledge.”

Henry didn’t even grace that with a response. He just snorted and slipped back into his shadow.

“Don’t look at me,” Sylph said when Damien turned toward her. “You’re good at a lot of things. I don’t think you’re getting any invites to noble parties for your speech-making abilities anytime soon, though.”

Damien grunted and sat on his bed. It wasn’t nearly as comfortable as the ones in Mountain Hall or Kingsfront, but it felt right. Sylph sat next to him.

“How long do you think we’ll have?”

“Until the Corruption does something?” Damien asked.

Sylph nodded.

“I don’t know. I wish I did. The Void and the Corruption just don’t work at the speed we do. Years don’t matter as much to them as they do to us. I’m hoping we’ll run into Delph soon and he’ll have figured something out. Either him or Mel. Considering everything they’ve done to get this far, they’d better.”

Sylph nodded, her eyebrows tightening in anger. “I still can’t believe he lied to us like that. He’s got a lot to make up for.”

Damien nodded. “Yeah. Knowing him, though, he’s probably waiting for the most inopportune moment to pop back out and—”

He trailed off and stared at the door. Sylph followed his gaze.

“He’s waiting outside, isn’t he?” Damien asked.

“Almost certainly,” Sylph said. They rose back to their feet, and Damien pushed the door open.

Delph cocked an eyebrow. “Well, shit. I’ve been found out.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Damien said. “Were you really just going to be waiting out here to barge in? Or were you planning on dropping off another one of your papers?”

“I was hoping I could burst in at a worse time,” Delph replied, rubbing his stubble-covered chin. “This really does take away a lot of my dramatic effect, you know. I work very hard to keep it up.”

“Then, you should hide your presence better,” Sylph said. “We knew you were here.”

“Actually, I mostly guessed. It just seemed like a very Delph-like thing to do,” Damien said.

“That actually hurts more than knowing I was spotted,” Delph said, pursing his lips. “Oh, well. That’s ruined, so we might as well move on with it. Have you seen any movement from the Corruption?”

“Nothing on my end,” Damien replied, crossing his arms and leaning against the mountain wall. “But I did have to fight with It Who Stills the Seas who—if I recall correctly—you released.”

Delph grunted. “Oops. You won, though. That’s all that matters.”

“I wasn’t fighting the real thing. It was just a very jumped-up spell,” Damien said. “The Void isn’t sitting around, Delph. I doubt the Corruption is either. We were both hoping you’d have some information.”

“I do, but nothing good. Dredd and I have recruited several other mages, and we’ve been hunting the Corruption whenever it shows up, but it feels

like there's no end to them. On top of that, I'm pretty sure he's got at least one Corruption Seed that's about to evolve."

"Shit," Damien said. "Actually, I don't really know what that entails. It sounds bad, though. When a Seed evolves, is it like our cores evolving?"

Delph's cloak unraveled from his shoulders, taking on a small humanoid form as Havel cleared his throat and put on a pair of gray spectacles—ones made out of the same material as the rest of him.

"Worse. The Seed needs to consume an enormous amount of power to evolve. Very rarely have they ever evolved in previous Cycles. The Void always ends things before they can. But, when they do, they can rival Void creatures in power."

"Of course, they can," Damien said wearily. "Why wouldn't they be able to?"

"How do you know it's about to evolve?" Sylph asked. "And if you know this, why haven't we gone out to kill it?"

"We know because of me," Havel said, tapping himself on the chest. "I compared the Seed's strength to the Seed that evolved many Cycles ago. It's about eighty percent of the way there, so I imagine evolution could happen any time in the near future. Probably within a few months."

"Do we know where it is? Sylph is right," Damien said, "we should take care of it before it evolves."

"That's the problem," Delph said. Havel melted back into a cloak and wrapped around him, returning to his normal position around the professor's shoulders. "The Seed popped out of a portal near Blackmist a few weeks ago. Dredd and I felt it, so we went to fight the thing and nearly won, but it escaped to a snowy landscape. I believe it's hiding in the Void. We can't follow it there."

"Damn," Damien concluded, his lips pressing thin. "It could be anywhere, then. If I knew where, I could probably chase after it. Actually, if I have enough time, I could probably track it down."

"That's what we were hoping," Delph said. "You're the only one who can both enter and leave the Void. The only human, anyway."

He reached into a pocket and pulled out a leather pouch, handing it to Damien. He opened it to find several rocks.

"Parts of the Seed?" Damien guessed.

"Yup. They might help you track the stupid thing down," Delph said. "When you do, make sure you don't go after it alone. Dredd and I will go

with you.”

“As will I,” Sylph said.

Delph nodded. “Sylph, too.”

“I’ll do what I can.” Damien closed the bag and tucked it into his belt. “But I don’t have any Void tracking spells right now. It might take me a little while to adapt one properly.”

“Like Havel said, we’ve probably got at least a month,” Delph said. “You think you can do it by then?”

“Yeah,” Damien replied. “I can do that. But I’ve got a more important question, Professor.”

“Oh?”

“I didn’t think about this until just now,” Damien said, eyes narrow. “But this just struck me. Havel knew what we were trying to do this entire time. He knew the truth about the Void creatures and me. So...how come he let you free It Who Stills the Seas without warning you about it?”

## CHAPTER

# THREE

Havel, who had only just settled back down as a cloak, slipped off Delph's shoulders once more.

"I was wondering if you'd noticed that," Havel said. "I was kind of hoping we could avoid the question."

"Unfortunate," Damien said. "We can't. Why'd you do it?"

"Because I'm playing every angle I can get," Havel replied, his gray body rippling in a shrug. "At the time, I had no idea if you would successfully pass the Faceless' challenge. Frankly, even though I wanted you to, I assumed you wouldn't."

"You knew the Corruption was getting stronger, so you purposely let Delph release one of the Void creatures to try to balance it out better, so they'd both slow each other down," Sylph realized. "That's...bold. And stupid. What if the Void had been stronger than you'd thought?"

"Then, the Mortal Plane would be reset," Havel replied. "You're acting like we have a lot of choice or control over our situation. The Void and the Corruption hold an overwhelming advantage. If either of them gets stronger than the other by too much, it's all over."

"Why couldn't you just tell us?" Damien demanded, throwing his hands out. "Or...I don't know, one of the other professors? Or literally anyone?"

"You know as well as I do what would happen to anyone who has a Void companion," Havel said. "Delph would never be allowed to live normally again."

"So, you risked the entire Mortal Plane strictly to avoid inconveniencing Delph?" Damien asked.

“You’re putting it in a way that makes me look really bad,” Havel said. “I don’t see you revealing Henry’s nature to everyone. I’m sure their good will would go long enough to hear you out before they tried to kill you, right?”

“I’m sure a few of the professors would listen,” Damien said, crossing his arms. “And Whisp is an alcoholic, but she seems to care about the school and its students, at least to a degree. Do you really think she’d just try to kill Delph out of nowhere?”

Havel laughed. “You don’t know anything about Whisp, Damien.”

“If it helps, Havel didn’t tell me a word,” Delph said, glaring at his companion. “I had no idea that It Who Stills the Seas was there until after he was freed. Havel kept it from me as well.”

“It doesn’t,” Damien said flatly. “But I don’t think there’s anything that can be done about it now. It Who Stills the Seas is out, and the Void probably isn’t far from reaching their goal. After we deal with this Corruption Seed, we’ll need to go after them as well.”

“Not like you’ll be able to, but make sure you don’t mistakenly damage one of the sides too much,” Havel warned, slipping back up to Delph’s shoulders. “We’re in a precarious balance. If any side is weakened too much, it’ll all come crashing down.”

“We’ll continue training soon,” Delph said. “Void or not, you’ve still got a lot to improve at. I’m curious to see if you or Sylph got much useful out of your little vacations.”

Damien smirked. “Oh, you’ve got another thing coming. You’d be surprised to find—”

Sylph clapped a hand over his mouth, and Delph cocked an eyebrow. “Find what?”

“You’ll see,” Sylph said, removing her hand.

“I hate surprises,” Delph said. “Tell me now.”

“No,” Damien and Sylph said at the same time.

“Especially not after I know it’s going to tick you off not knowing,” Damien added. “Good catch, Sylph.”

“Damn kids. No respect,” Delph growled, turning on his heel and striding off. “I’ll see you for training.”

He stepped over the edge of the mountain, vanishing into a gray portal before he could fall. Damien rolled his eyes.

“Planes, he’s dramatic.”

“Do you really think he and Havel were telling the truth?”

“I don’t know,” Damien said, his features growing serious. “They’ve done a lot of lying. Some of it has been for good reason, but the rest...I just don’t know. The more I learn about Delph, the less I realize we really know him.”

“Those were about my thoughts as well,” Sylph said as they walked back into their room, letting the door swing shut behind them. “We’ll just keep doing what we have been. Watching. I hate to ask this, but—if we had to—could you and Henry defeat him? In a serious fight.”

Damien let out a sigh. “I don’t know. The problem is that he’s hiding so many things that I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s kept his real strength secret as well. Delph is probably the strongest mage we’ve met.”

“Good assessment,” Henry said from within Damien’s shadow, speaking out loud so that Sylph could hear him, too. “Havel is the first Void creature, Sylph. The amount of knowledge he must have...if we were to fight, it would be very bad. Damien has access to Void magic while Delph doesn’t, which should even the scales a little, but Havel can use it himself. We should very much hope that Delph is never against us.”

Sylph nodded grimly. “All we can do is train, then. Get on that tracking spell as quickly as you can, Damien. We need to deal with the Corruption Seed as quickly as possible.”

“That’s the plan,” Damien said, walking over to their training rooms. A thin layer of dust had settled in over just about the stone. They hadn’t been very neat in the first place, so it wasn’t much of a difference.

Damien mentally prodded Henry, showing him a combination of two rune circles. After a moment, his companion gave him an approving grunt. The Ether poured from Damien’s fingertip, forming into a yawning black portal.

Air rushed into it, sucking the dust and the smallest pieces of rubble from the ground before snapping shut a moment later. Sylph raised an eyebrow.

“That’s new.”

“Just copying a spell I’ve seen Henry do once or twice,” Damien replied. “They’re starting to come easier to me.”

“Probably because you’re actually making your own spells instead of just copying them like most of us,” Sylph said. “If runecraft wasn’t so

extensive, I would have wondered why the colleges didn't all teach it as a mandatory part of the battle mage courses."

"It just isn't realistic for most people," Damien said. "I was almost completely self-taught after all the basic runecraft we learned in Ardenford. There's just too much information you need to know in order to properly make your own spells. It would be great if everyone could do it, but the time commitment is too high."

"Not to mention it actually takes some skill," Henry piped up, forming a mouth in Damien's shadow. "You'd be surprised to know how uncreative many people are. Blackmist seems to have it generally right. You saw that Delph assigned Nolan to the runecrafting class. That wasn't a mistake. Any students that they suspect have the creativity to use runes end up getting assigned to that class."

"I didn't get put there," Sylph said, scrunching her nose. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

Henry snorted. "As if you have the Ether to play around with making your own spells. Focus on your strengths. And, speaking of those, your Corrupted abilities don't use your own Ether, right? They're basically perfect for you."

"They are," Sylph admitted. "Especially if I'm fighting someone using a lot of Ether that I can steal."

"Good. Give me more compliments," Henry said. "I deserve them. Don't forget that I was the one who stuck the Corruption inside you and weaved your little mortal frame back together so you didn't blow up in a geyser of green goo and rock."

"Ignore him," Damien said, crushing the mouth beneath his heel. Henry formed another one an inch to the side, blew a raspberry at him, then slipped away with a cackle.

Sylph laughed. "I guess it's back to standard, then. I'm going to get to practicing. There's still a lot of time left in the day."

"Likewise," Damien said. "I'll see you for dinner."

He walked into the farthest training room, grabbing his dust-covered bag of chalk from the ground and cleaning it like he had the previous one. He pulled a stick of chalk out and sat down, already starting to put together some ideas on how he might get a suitably powerful tracking spell.

Hours passed, and Damien ran his chalk down to a nub covering the ground in rune circles. Henry watched his work, providing insight when it

was needed. He didn't speak much, which suited Damien just fine.

He was getting more comfortable with all of his powers with every passing day, and the thing he needed most to create the spell was concentration. With Henry catching any small, unimportant flaws such as a missing rune that might end up detonating the Ether along the line of the tracking spell, possibly killing or maiming someone in its path, he was making fantastic progress.

Ironically, the only time he actually would have liked to have Henry just give him a spell, his companion didn't have one. Before bonding with Damien, Henry's senses had been so powerful that a tracking spell was worthless. He just *knew*. He'd picked up some mortal tracking spells, but Damien had one of those replicated within the first few hours of work.

A normal spell wasn't enough. He needed to track into the Void, and that made everything magnitudes more difficult. Getting Ether into the Void without it getting lost or consumed was the first major problem. If he could manage that, he still needed to search an enormous area for a very small signature of energy and relay that information back.

Damien lifted his weary eyes many hours later, covering a yawn with the back of his hand. The floor was completely covered with scribble marks, and his fingers ached from exertion. His legs buzzed as he clambered upright, shaking them off to try to get the feeling back.

"Not bad," Henry said. "You've made decent progress. I've got an idea of how you can get the Ether into the Void safely, but I want to see what you come up with. If the time crunch gets too bad, I'll just give it to you."

"That's fine," Damien said, rubbing his eyes. "I think I should be able to get that in the next few days. I just need to spend more time studying the effects of the Void runes. It feels like half the time they make absolutely no sense."

"That's because they don't," Henry said helpfully."

Damien grimaced. "Figures."

He brushed the chalk off his clothes and walked into the other training room. It was empty, but there were scuff marks on the wall that he was pretty sure hadn't been there a few hours ago.

Walking out into the main room, Damien caught sight of Sylph as she stepped out of the bathroom, wringing water out of her hair.

"Good timing," Sylph said. "I just finished training. I didn't disturb you, did I?"

“Didn’t even realize you were doing anything other than meditating,” Damien replied. “I guess I was just really caught up.”

“Make any progress?”

He waggled a hand in the air. “I made progress. Not sure if I’d say it was a lot, but I’m still on track.”

“Progress is progress,” Sylph said. “Where should we get food? Unless we wanted to cook.”

Damien curled his lip. “Unless you’re offering, I think I’ve seen the results of our cooking. We’ve got more than enough coin to buy something, and the benefits we’d get from eating monsters are probably going to be fairly negligible at this point.”

“Especially considering I think I’ve got almost as much monster in me as human,” Sylph said. She paused, then laughed. “As do you.”

“I am not a monster,” Henry complained. “I prefer to think of myself as a bringer of happiness. To myself.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Damien said.

“I don’t sleep.”

“Nor are you very good at catching phrases of speech.”

“It’s called being intentionally obtuse,” Henry said. “You wouldn’t know since you have to not be obtuse in order to choose to become obtuse.”

“Sometimes, I wonder if there’s any actual rational thought that goes on in his head,” Damien said to Sylph.

She shrugged in response. “No comment.”

Henry harrumphed. Damien felt him gearing up for a rant and was about to shove him back into his mind when a knock rang out against the stone door. Damien extended his senses, noticing Sylph going still to do the same.

“I don’t recognize them,” Sylph said, a tiny trickle of Ether traveling to her palm.

“I do,” Damien said, walking up to the door. “Don’t worry. They’re friends.”

He pushed it open. Xil, Alina, and Venus stood on the plateau, glancing around nervously. Xil let out a pent up breath when she saw Damien.

“Damien. I half-thought your insane Dean sent us to the wrong room.”

“Nice to see you, all,” Damien said as Sylph walked up to stand beside him. “You’re here a little earlier than I expected.”

“Kat gathered us all up and said we were going on a field trip,” Xil said. “When we got here, the dean told Alina and I that we were accepted. We

didn't even have to take an entrance exam..."

"She's an odd one," Damien said. "I'm glad it worked out, though."

Xil lowered her head in respect. "I owe you my life and more. You and Venus. And Quinlan. Most of you, actually. Thank you."

"It really wasn't much trouble," Damien replied with a shrug. "Glad it worked out. But...why is Venus here?"

"Quinlan is heading over as well, once she finishes up a quest she's currently on," Venus said, crossing her arms. "And nobody else in Mountain Hall was worth my time. I asked Kat if I could tag along, and she said yes."

"Well, welcome to Blackmist, I guess," Damien said. "There are quite a few pretty strong people here. I'd love to see how you'd fair against Cheese or Aven. Actually, I'd like to see how I fair against her myself."

"I'll be sure to seek them out," Venus said. "Who's the girl behind you? Is that Sylph?"

"What other woman would be in my room? Actually, given my track record, don't answer that," Damien said. "Everyone, this is Sylph."

Sylph inclined her head politely.

"I'm sorry for intruding on Damien's space," Xil said. "I hope I didn't cause you any issues."

"It's fine," Sylph said with a shrug. "I don't care."

"Say, does Delph know Kat is yere yet?" Damien asked.

"I don't think so," Alina said. "She's not on campus yet. She dropped us off, and then left, saying she had to take care of something."

"Good," Damien said. "I want to be there when they meet. I get the feeling it'll be fun."

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Why?” Alina asked.

“They’ve got some sort of business,” Damien replied. “And I can’t remember the last time I saw Delph really surprised. The arrogant prick needs it, and it’ll be funny to watch.”

“I guess I’ll take your word for it,” Alina said. She shifted her feet and peered over Damien’s shoulder. “That’s a pretty small room.”

“It’s not the biggest, but it’s enough for us.” Damien’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why is that a problem?”

Venus cleared her throat and glanced to the side. “Your dean said that, since you were the reason we were here, we were meant to stay in your room.”

Damien’s eye twitched. “Of course, she did.”

“Apparently, there weren’t any more spots,” Xil provided helpfully.

“It’s a mountain,” Damien said flatly. “There’s always spots in a mountain.”

“Sorry to make more trouble for you.” Xil wrung her hands. “We can try to find a hotel or something in the area to stay in instead.”

“It’s fine,” Damien said, shaking his head. He paused and sent a questioning glance at Sylph. “So long as you don’t mind?”

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Sylph said with a shrug. “Just use destructive energy to make them a room or two.”

“That will take days!” Venus exclaimed. “Not that we aren’t worth the effort, but that’s too much. We can’t ask that of you.”

Damien just shook his head and walked back inside. “How do we want these arranged, Alina? Is Quinlan staying with us as well?”

“I don’t know. She can probably get a room for herself considering her status, but your dean seems a little...unhinged.”

“A room for you and Quinlan, then another for Venus and Xil,” Damien concluded, walking over to the hall that led into their makeshift kitchen. The girls followed him in, doing their best to not look around too much and failing miserably.

“Those are our beds,” Sylph provided.

“Whose is whose? They look the same,” Xil said.

“Don’t know. I forgot. You can’t have them, though.”

“Noted,” Alina said. “Don’t worry. We brought a bunch of stuff. Quinlan and Venus bought it for us at Mountain Hall before we left, so we’ve got soap, toiletries, all the stuff anyone would need when moving somewhere.”

“Toothbrushes?” Sylph asked.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t we bring those?”

“No reason,” Sylph said, clearing her throat. “Damien, do you need help making the rooms?”

Darkness washed over Damien’s mage armor. Black metal plates formed over his chest and greaves wrapped around his limbs. The cape expanded behind him as eyes snapped open all over it.

“Don’t worry about it. Henry and I can take care of this,” Damien replied, extending his hands toward the wall. A dozen twisting pillars of destructive energy wound out of his hands, writhing like tentacles as they melted through the stone, sending dust flying everywhere.

Within the span of minutes, Damien had an entire room carved out. He directed the energy onward, forming another thin hall as he walked forward. Stone sheared away and dust coated his clothes as their visitors watched in stunned silence.

A short while later, Damien let the spells drop away and brushed the dust off his chest. He sent one more spark of Ether out, forming a portal in the hallway connecting the rooms. A powerful rush of air shot past all of them, nearly yanking Xil off her feet as all the dust was devoured by the yawning black disk. It closed, taking the wind with it.

*Thanks for the help.*

“Did you see them looking at my cool new Battle Manifestation? They love it. They love me. Tell them that I’ll be signing autographs later today.”

*Tell them yourself.*

“No. That takes half the fun out if it.” Henry retreated into the back of Damien’s mind with a cackle.

“Seven Planes,” Xil breathed. “You were holding back at Mountain Hall. Just how much Ether do you have? I could have worked for a week and not gotten that much done.”

“Eight,” Damien corrected instinctively. He winced. “Ah, never mind that.”

“Never mind?” Venus demanded, stepping forward and running a hand along the wall in shock. She studied her fingers. “There’s no dust left either. You’ve got to have...what, at least five times my Ether? You don’t even look tired.”

“I’ve had some special training.”

“What kind of training does that to someone?” Venus demanded. “You’re a demon!”

Xil put a hand on Venus’ shoulder. “He just made rooms for us, Venus.”

Venus blinked. She cleared her throat, her cheeks reddening slightly. “Uh, sorry about that. I didn’t mean to yell.”

“It’s fine,” Damien said. A thought struck him, and he let out a small chuckle. “Actually, I might be able to help train you all a little. No promises, though. It’ll depend on how other things I’m working on right now go.”

“You might want to get some kind of doors as well. Maybe curtains?” Sylph suggested. “Hm. Damien, could you make one more room, actually? Our beds are now in the main walkway of what is apparently an apartment. It might be nice to get out of the footpath.”

“Oh. Good idea,” Damien said. He walked back to the first room, then extended his hands. He didn’t ask for Henry’s help this time and dug away a third room in just a few more minutes. When he finished, the strain of running out of Ether was finally starting to get to him.

“You still had more?” Venus asked, her mouth hanging wide open. “This is impossible. Are you hiding artifacts on yourself or something?”

“Nah. That’s a good idea, though,” Damien said. “We’ve got a bunch of points to spend at the pavilion, Sylph. We should see what we can get. Maybe tomorrow?”

“That works,” Sylph said, walking into the main hall. “One second.”

She grunted, then walked back through the hall, carrying the bed sideways with a single hand. She had to squeeze through the hall at an

angle, but she made it look like the bed was made of sea foam.

Sylph plopped the bed in the corner of the room and gave it an approving nod. “There. Now we’ve got a bed.”

Venus squinted at the bed. “Is that not made of wood?”

“It is,” Sylph said. “Why?”

“Were you using magic to carry it?”

“No. It’s just a very light bed.”

“It’s got a solid wood frame. You carried it with one hand.”

“These are statements,” Sylph observed.

“I give up,” Venus said. “I want to do that, too. Please, teach me. If I could do what you two could, I could beat Quinlan.”

“Damien is really busy, and I’m not sure how much my training would help you,” Sylph mused. “But I suppose it can’t hurt to try. I’ll see what I can do.”

“So long as it isn’t too much of a bother,” Xil said hurriedly. “We don’t want to intrude.”

Venus nodded. “Yeah, what Xil said. Sorry. I got caught a bit off guard. Has Blackmist really been holding back this much in the previous tournaments? You’ve underperformed in nearly everything until this year.”

Damien started to shake his head, but Sylph stopped him.

“Actually, I think they have been,” she said. “I mentioned this to Delph while Damien was in the—ah, gone. Apparently, Aven and Cheese haven’t participated in many of the major tournaments and have sandbagged the ones they have competed in. Whisp has been trying to make Blackmist look incompetent on purpose.”

“Seriously?” Damien asked. “Why?”

“Not sure,” Sylph replied. “To be honest, I didn’t really care at the time. I had more important things to worry about.”

“I’ll ask Whisp at some point,” Damien said. “It doesn’t seem too pressing. Do you guys need anything else?”

“I think this is all we can ask for,” Alina said. “Thank you both. We’ll try not to intrude on your privacy too much. I’m sorry our arrival is going to cause trouble for you.”

Damien’s stomach rumbled. He scrunched his nose and shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll figure out a way to try to get privacy for all of us. Trust me, you lot are going to be the ones who needs it the most.”

“What? Why?” Venus asked.

“Because Henry likes to wander off while I sleep, and anyone in his direct path probably isn’t going to have a great time,” Damien said with an ominous chuckle. “I hope you’ve got some goats to sacrifice. Now, who’s hungry? I’m starving.”

“Depends. Are you paying?” Alina asked with a sheepish grin. “Quinlan hasn’t given me much spending money to work with yet.”

“Alina!” Venus said, glaring at her. “I’ll pay for your meal.”

Damien laughed. “Sounds good. Let’s go, then. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

Their growing group walked back out onto the plateau. Damien quickly glanced inside both Mark and the Grays’ rooms, but none of them looked to be back from their transfers yet, so they headed into Blackmist’s campus on their own.

A small part of Damien was convinced that there was no chance they’d be able to successfully make it to the restaurant and eat without running into some form of trouble. Perhaps he’d just spent too much time at Mountain Hall, or maybe he was just typically unluckier when he was on his own.

Whatever the case might have been, they weren’t bothered while they ate. Damien and Sylph got pancakes and waffles respectively, which drew a few curious glances from everyone else, who elected to get more traditional dinner meals, but nobody was about to question them.

Venus even looked like she was about to change her order before Damien informed her that his diet had absolutely nothing to do with his training. She looked fairly relieved at that piece of information.

Once dinner was done, they wandered around Blackmist’s campus while Damien and Sylph pointed out the important buildings. What was meant to be a brief stop at the library turned into an hour long venture as Henry immediately darted into the romance section and refused to leave, causing Venus and Xil to both venture off to look around as well.

Damien didn’t bother going after them. He snagged a book on Light magic and leafed through it, more out of boredom than any desire to learn it. He *did* want to get started on figuring out some more Light spells in the near future, but the Void had his full concentration at the moment. Splitting his attention any further would have just been a waste of time.

Once everyone finished at the library and Henry made Damien check out half a dozen books, they all returned to the mountain.

“Are you really allowed to be carrying those around?” Alina asked, squinting at the spine of one of the novels in the pile. “There are some pretty graphic scenes on that, especially considering you haven’t even opened it yet.”

“Don’t ask me. Henry’s the one that wants it,” Damien said wearily. “Why would Blackmist even carry this kind of thing?”

“Because knowledge is power,” Henry said from his shadow, making Xil and Alina jump. Venus just glanced at the companion and shook her head, muttering under her breath about wishing her companion had a personality. “Also, the librarians have great tastes. Have you ever read *A Tale of Thrusting*? It’s probably the greatest thing to come out of this generation of writers.”

“That’s enough from you,” Damien said, banishing Henry from his shadow. Alina sent a curious glance at the stack of books.

“No,” Damien said. “You’re not allowed to read these. I will not be the reason that Quinlan’s sister starts reading smut.”

“I’ll just ask her to get the book for me. She never says no.”

Damien started whistling. “If I can’t hear you, then it isn’t my problem.”

The others laughed. They made it up to their room, and Damien paused outside their door. He craned his neck to look back at Mark and the Grays’ rooms as his senses brushed across something.

“I thought they weren’t back yet,” Venus said.

Damien set the stack of books down on the ground, ignoring Henry’s squawk of protest. There was a trace of Ether in Nolan’s room that he’d missed the first time they’d passed it. He walked over to it, pushing their expensive curtain out of the way.

“Damien?” Sylph asked.

A letter rested on Nolan’s bed, the tiny runes covering it leaking faint amounts of Ether. Damien picked the letter up, a frown crossing his features as he turned it over.

“It’s addressed to me.”

“That’s odd,” Sylph said. “Did he get back to Blackmist before us?”

Damien scanned the runes, then raised his eyebrows. He formed a thin blade of destructive energy at his fingertip and cut a thin line across one of the runes, causing the light emitting from them to fade away. Once it was

out, he slit open the top of the letter and pulled a folded slip out. He flipped it open, scanning its contents.

*Damien,*

*I know you've returned to Blackmist early—Yui let me know. I would have tried to get this in your room, but I already promised I wouldn't go into it without prior permission in Year One. If you're reading this, I'll assume the runes went off and the explosion caught your attention. It was just a loud noise, so nothing was damaged. I hope.*

*I'm in a lot of trouble. My parents found out I was dating Loretta, and they didn't approve. I didn't think they'd take it as badly as they did, but apparently losing Yui's courtship in addition to not dating a noble was...bad. Honestly, I'd thought they wouldn't care since I stepped down from succession, but it appears my father believed I was just bluffing.*

*I've been summoned back to my estate, but I fear for Loretta. I'm worried my parents may try to arrange for her removal. No—while I don't want to believe that they'd do that, I wouldn't put it past them. I'm sorry to come to you again, but I don't know who else to ask. I have no good way to contact the teachers, not that most of them would help even if they knew. Going against the Grays is normally a death sentence, but Loretta doesn't deserve any of this. Please, get her to safety immediately. I fear her life is in grave danger. Perhaps I am overreacting, but I don't want to take the risk. I know you leave Blackmist a lot. If she's gone, my father will probably forget about her soon enough—or I'll have dealt with him.*

*I will remain at my estate and do my best to control the situation. I would go to Blackmist myself if I could, but I am under constant supervision. I'll pay you back for this, I promise.*

*Sorry,  
Nolan*

Damien lowered the note and folded it back up, sliding it into a pocket.

“What’s wrong?” Sylph asked.

“Loretta’s in trouble, and I think Nolan is stuck in his family home,” Damien replied.

Sylph’s features instantly froze over, and she nodded. “Let’s go.”

“What’s going on?” Xil asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Damien replied. “We’ll be back soon enough. Just settle into the room and try to make yourselves at home. Sylph and I won’t be long.”

“The Grays are a huge noble house,” Venus said with a worried frown. “Getting on their bad side is really dangerous, Damien. Are you sure you’ll be okay? We could help.”

“I appreciate the offer, Venus, but there’s no need. They’re only a noble house, and we aren’t alone anyway.”

His shadow stretched out, and Henry rose from it, his skin smooth and gaunt. The girls all flinched, and Sylph’s eyes widened slightly as the Void creature arrived in his Full Manifestation. Light twisted around his emaciated features as two leathery black wings snapped open on Henry’s back.

“The two things I hate most in life,” Henry growled, swiping his claw-like fingers through the air. Thin black lines trailed behind them, melding together to form a watery portal. “People who annoy me and people who get in the way of my reading sessions. Whisp will know where the girl lives, and I haven’t had a good meal in a while. Let’s fix that.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Henry sank into Damien, wrapping around him like a second skin as he Warp Stepped, appearing at the base of the mountain. Sylph blurred after him, only slightly slower than his teleportation speed as they shot across campus and arrived at the Iron Cauldron in less than thirty seconds.

His senses confirmed Whisp's presence within the building, and Damien was through the door before it even fully registered. The waiter didn't even notice his arrival before he was at the door.

A jagged tentacle whipped out, slamming the door open with enough force to crack the wood. The waiter cried out, spinning toward them. His face paled at the sight of Damien. One of the eyes on Henry's wings snapped open before he could say anything.

The man's eyes rolled back in his head, and he crumpled. Sylph blurred inside, catching the man and lowering him to the ground before blurring over to stand beside Damien.

Whisp lowered her glass of wine. Even more bottles littered the table. Her eyes narrowed, and she rose from the table, swaying slightly. The dean's cheeks were rosy from the alcohol. "What's going on? Is the school under attack?"

"Where's Loretta's Room? Loretta Herder. She's under threat from the Gray house," Damien said. His voice came out deeper than normal, cut with a threatening, whispery undertone that overlayed over his words, almost akin to the myriad of tones that accompanied Herald's speech.

"The Grays? Why in the Seven Planes would they attack Blackmist?" Whisp asked. She closed her eyes and energy washed over the room,

prickling across Damien's skin. A few moments later, Whisp's eyes snapped open. All traces of her drunken stupor were gone. "Follow me."

Whisp launched out the door, blowing past stunned waiters. Purple energy crackled around her hands as gauntlets formed around her hands. Henry extended his wings and launched Damien into the air as Sylph flew into the sky above them.

Sylph kept pace with them, bounding off rippling disks of air that formed beneath her feet with every step.

"How are you involved with this?" Whisp asked as they shot toward one of the mountains. "Are the Grays going rogue?"

"They're after Loretta because of Nolan," Damien replied, slightly surprised that the alcoholic dean actually remembered Nolan's name, much less where Loretta lived. As they flew toward the mountain, a faint haze rose up around it, obscuring the rooms.

Whisp snapped her metal-clad fingers, and it vanished. They alighted on a plateau before several cave entrances, and Whisp strode into the centermost one. Bloodstains covered the floor and walls. Furniture was strewn across the ground, and one of the two beds in the room was split in two.

Damien's senses passed over the room, brushing across a presence behind the bathroom wall. His eyes narrowed, and he went to call out, but Whisp was faster. She was also more ruthless—the woman didn't even check who it was.

She flicked her fingers, and a ripple of compressed purple light shot across the room. It passed through the stone. There was a loud crash as a mirror shattered and a man snarled in pain.

Whisp jerked her hand back, ripping a portion of the stone away to reveal the bathroom. She'd pinned a man to the wall above the sink. Blood poured down his back from where the mirror had cut into him, and bands of purple light constricted around his arms and legs.

"The Grays have gotten awful cocky if they think they can attacks Blackmist students while I'm still on duty." Whisp snarled.

"Damn. Never thought the drunk lady actually gave a shit," Henry observed in Damien's mind. "Do you sense Loretta?"

*No. I'm looking.*

"This is none of your business," the man spat. "The Grays are well within their rights. All proper recompense fees will be paid for her death.

Back off, Dean Whisp. This isn't a fight Blackmist can afford to take. It's just one student, anyway."

"Recompense fees?" Whisp asked, her hair lifting into the air as power crackled between the fingers of her gauntlets. "Do you think the lives of my students can be so easily bought?"

"They were easy enough to take," the man said with a sharp bark of laughter. "And you can't kill me, Whisp. You're a dean, even if just an acting one, and you're beholden to following the queen's orders. Killing an agent of the Gray house would be directly disobeying her ordinance of avoiding in-kingdom fighting. You'd be executed."

"Trust me, I can be very creative," Whisp growled. "Even if I can't kill you, I can certainly cut you apart until you tell me where the girl is."

"There's nothing you can cut off that the healers can't put on. Give it up, Whisp. Nobody will fault you for losing track of one worthless commoner girl. The queen might even thank you."

Whisp's hands trembled with fury. Then, she turned around, letting the man slip down the wall. He smirked, brushing himself off as he rose to his feet. "Good choice."

"Damien, I am assigning you a quest," Whisp said, ignoring the man and turning her back on them. She walked to the edge of the room. "Loretta appears to have gone missing during the school year. Find her. As the dean, I'm afraid I'm far too occupied to search for her. You'll have to do it yourself. Make sure not to leave any scraps lying around, or I'm billing you for campus cleanup services."

The Gray agent burst into laughter. "Oh, that's cute. Trying to skirt the queen's orders by—"

A sharpened tendril punched into the man's chest and slammed him into the wall, cutting him off. Ether gathered around the man's hand, forming into a shimmering gray blade. He cut the tendril, dropping back to the ground and laughing.

"Good hit, kid. But I'm a real mage, not a student. You're out of your—"

His arm fell to the ground, the magical blade clattering against the ground before fading away. Blood sprayed from the wound, and Sylph's scythe retracted, blood dripping from it.

Damien didn't wait so they could cut the man off a third time. Henry's wings extended, and one of the eyes snapped open. The mage's words cut

off in his throat, and his eyes widened until they were nearly all white.

Gray covered the world, and Damien reached out, pressing his palm to the man's forehead even as Henry's magic eroded his sanity. Shattered runes sprung to the forefront of Damien's mind, and he called upon the Void.

### **“Consume.”**

Scenes flashed through Damien's mind as his Void-empowered mental energy dug through the mage's head, ripping memories out of it. In an instant, Damien knew where the man's companions—Riley and Wren, according to his memories—had taken Loretta.

Damien never bothered learning the man's name. His Ether carved through his mind, ripping every semblance of mortal life apart and leaving behind a broken husk. He flicked his fingers, opening a black portal beneath what remained of the mage. He tumbled into the Void, and Sylph kicked the man's severed arm into the darkness before Damien let it snap back shut, bringing the world back into color.

“They didn't want to kill her on campus. They were hoping to avoid dealing with Whisp,” Damien said, already flying out of the cave, Sylph at his side. “They're going through the forest and into the countryside.”

That was all that needed to be said. They cut through the sky, Blackmist's campus blurring beneath them. Damien interspersed Warp Steps with the flaps of Henry's wings, giving them the speed to match Sylph.

They quickly left Blackmist's borders and passed over the forest. As they flew, his senses scoured across the grassy hills beneath.

“To the east, in the valley,” Sylph said, abruptly changing directions and making a beeline for the ground.

Damien followed after her, his senses picking up the presence of three people an instant after Sylph pointed out their location. He shot over the edge of the sloping hills. Two men stood beside a bound figure on the ground. They both wore dark clothing, but one had several bloody bandages on his arms and legs.

Damien Warp Stepped, appearing directly behind them. Henry rose from his back, his razor-sharp claws flashing through the air through one of the men. Damien wasn't sure which of them it was—he'd already forgotten which was which.

The man split apart, toppling to the ground in dozens of pieces. His partner's eyes widened in horror, and he spun toward Damien, Ether

billowing from his fingertips as a bolt of lightning started to form.

His hands split from his wrists, falling to the ground as Sylph arrived, the two scythes extending from her back already swinging. The man's head followed his hands to the ground and, an instant later, he pitched forward, blood pouring from his body.

Damien cast a modified Devour beneath each of the men, dropping their remains into the Void. On the ground, Loretta groaned. She was hastily bound in thin, braided metal rope. Sylph knelt beside her, forming a blade on one of her fingertips and cutting the bindings apart.

Henry retracted his wings, slipping back into Damien's shadow as Sylph helped Loretta sit upright. The girl was covered in injuries, many of which looked deep enough to be fatal.

"We killed all of them," Sylph said, pulling a waterskin from a pouch and holding it to the girl's lips. "Don't worry. You're safe."

The wounds covering Loretta's body slowly faded. They didn't completely seal over, but the worst of the damage repaired itself.

"Seven Planes, I've never been happier to see you," Loretta said after draining the waterskin. She let out a mixture between a relieved sob and a laugh. "Gods, how did you find me?"

"I asked them politely," Damien replied. "Nolan sent us a warning that you were in trouble. What happened? Was anyone else injured?"

"It was just me," Loretta said. "I was alone in the room when I got attacked. There were three of them."

She glanced around, her face pale. "There was a third! We need to be careful, he might be —"

"Already dead," Damien said, shaking his head. "They're all gone."

"Oh, right. I think I overheard them saying they felt someone powerful coming and had one stay back to deal with it." Loretta slumped back, relief washing over her face. "Planes. I thought I was going to die."

"You didn't," Sylph said helpfully. "That's always a good thing."

Loretta let out a snort of hysterical laughter. "Guess so. Planes, you two are strong. How did you kill two fully grown mages? And they were Gray — Wait. Nolan!"

"What about him?" Damien asked. "He's at the Gray estate according to the letter he sent to warn us that you were in danger, but he only seemed to suspect there might be trouble, not that you'd be a minute away from getting killed."

Loretta's face paled. "Nolan told me he was going to visit the Gray estate because they'd found out we were dating. That was a few days ago. Is he okay?"

"No idea," Damien replied honestly. "But his letter made it sound like you were the only one in danger. I don't think his parents are going to kill him or anything."

Loretta gritted her teeth. "They tried to kill me. Planes, what kind of psychopath tries to kill their son's girlfriend because she isn't a noble? So much for 'the worst someone can say is no.' They're insane."

"Explains a lot about how Nolan acted when we first met him," Sylph muttered. "Still, three assassins for one person. They *really* wanted to get rid of you."

"Four," Loretta replied, a flash of defiance lighting behind her eyes. "I killed one of them. I don't know what they did with the body. One of them must have somehow cleaned it up if you didn't see it."

"You put up a good fight," Damien said. "You should be proud of your performance. Fighting four fully trained mages and managing to kill one—that's not something most Year Twos could do."

"Yeah. I guess." Loretta wrapped her arms around her chest and shuddered. Then, her eyes narrowed, and she set her jaw. "Nolan is probably stuck at the Gray's house."

"Might be better to be more concerned about yourself," Damien said. "He'll be fine, but they could send more assassins after you. I mean, that does seem a little excessive, and I'm sure they've got better things to do than constantly hound you now that their first four have failed, but I wouldn't put it past them."

"They don't know I survived yet," Loretta said, pushing herself upright. She tottered for a moment, and Sylph reached out to stabilize her, but the girl caught her own balance. "And who knows what they'll do if they find out that Nolan warned us that I would be attacked."

"Before you do anything, you need to get properly healed," Sylph said. "I didn't have enough water to fully repair all your wounds. And if you're thinking about attacking the Grays to get Nolan out—it won't work. You're too weak."

Damien winced at the casual way Sylph put it, but she wasn't wrong. Granted, Loretta had done pretty well for herself against three assassins

making a surprise attack, but that wasn't the same as storming the largest Noble house in the kingdom.

"I'm not an idiot," Loretta replied, wobbling slightly on her feet. Sylph steadied her. "But...I can't just do nothing. Will Whisp or Delph help us?"

"I don't think they can," Damien said. "Whisp was with us when we found the assassin in your room. I think the queen has orders that prohibit any of the powerful political figures like nobles or deans from fighting directly."

"Then, I've got to do it. I'll find a way to sneak him out or something," Loretta said. "I have to."

"I never said we're leaving him." Damien's shadow twitched angrily. "Nolan is a friend, and I don't take kindly to anyone attacking people while we've got the threat of the Corruption breathing down our necks. We're better off without them. We just need you somewhere safe so. If Sylph and I go off to get Nolan and you get killed by another assassin, this is all for nothing."

"You mean you can help Nolan?" Loretta asked, her eyes widening. "Please, if you can do anything, do it as soon as possible."

"We just need to get you to safety first," Sylph said. "Damien is right. Nolan isn't going to thank us if we rush over to him and get back to find you dead."

"Would you be sitting around if Damien was in the same situation?"

Sylph's eyes went cold. "I would start killing."

"Then, you know what I want to do," Loretta spat.

"The best thing you can do is remain safe, then," Damien said. "Sylph and I are strong enough to challenge the Grays—at least for long enough to re-kidnap Nolan. We just need to get you somewhere where the Grays can't get you first."

"Okay," Loretta said, swallowing. "If that's what'll help, then I'll do it."

"Where?" Sylph asked. "They already got into Blackmist once, and they've got fully fledged mages. We can't underestimate them."

"I think I have an idea," Damien replied, his voice turning frigid as hues of gray washed over the world. "It's a little cold, though."

## CHAPTER

# SIX

A yawning portal split open before them, an icy chill washing out from within it. Moon's plain stone cave looked just how Damien had left it. Desolate—but safe. Relatively, at least.

“What is that place?” Loretta asked. “Another room in Blackmist?”

“No. It's...elsewhere,” Damien replied. “Safe, so long as you remain within the cave. Don't go out onto the mountain. As long as you stay put, you should be totally safe.”

“Okay.”

“And don't touch anything,” Damien added. “It's probably more dangerous than you think. All things considered, I think you'll find that you aren't there very long at all.”

Confusion washed across Loretta's face, but she settled for giving him a hesitant nod. “Understood. I won't touch anything, but what do you mean by that? Are you really going to be able to get Nolan to safety that quickly?”

“We'll do our best,” Sylph promised, sending Damien a worried glance. Loretta took one last look at both of them, then stepped through the portal and into the cave. She turned around and gave them a terse, determined smile.

“Be careful.”

“We will,” Damien said, allowing the portal to close.

“Was that the Void?” Sylph asked.

“Yes.”

“Was that really the safest place to send her?”

“Where else?” Damien asked. “Nobody can reach her there, and Moon had it defended. Probably. I’m sure he had some sort of shielding in there with all the enemies he had.”

“Do you really think the Grays want her dead that badly?” Sylph asked, her scythes retracting into her back. “I’m sure your mother wouldn’t have minded watching over her for a few days, and I doubt they’d be going to Ardenford to hunt her down—not without a lead.”

“My mother?” Damien asked, cocking his head to the side. “Huh. I suppose that could have worked, but it isn’t as safe as the Void.”

“If you’re sure,” Sylph said. “Let’s focus on the Grays, then. I’m not sure we have the strength to take them head on—and I don’t think we can afford to kill that many mages, even if we could. The kingdom is already in enough danger from the Corruption.”

“Agreed,” Damien said. “The best thing we can do is get Nolan out with as little damage as possible. I’m certain the Grays have some really powerful mages—not the rabble they sent to take care of Loretta, but ones that would actually pose threats to us.”

“That should be a given,” Sylph agreed. “I can infiltrate their house if I’m moving on my own. I doubt they’ve got any defenses I wasn’t trained for. But it will be harder if you’re coming along.”

“Until you run into someone. It’s unlikely that Nolan will be alone. The chances of at least one fight are pretty high, and if you get surrounded, it could be bad. I can be stealthy.”

“I know,” Sylph said with a nod. “But we should probably double down on that. Any advantage we can get will help. If we go in together, I think the most likely result will be a lot of dead mages, which isn’t our goal.”

“Treasure Pavilion?” Damien suggested.

“Exactly what I was thinking. I’m certain we’ll be able to find something that can be useful there. The more leverage we have, the less of the Grays’ men we’ll have to kill.”

“Let’s go, then,” Damien said. “I’d assume the faster we get to the Gray estate, the better. They’re going to start wondering what happened to their agents.”

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They reached the Treasure Pavilion in less than a minute, aided by their empowered movement abilities. Auntie sat in her chair behind the desk, leafing through a large stack of papers. When she spotted Damien and Sylph, her eyebrows rose.

“I was wondering when you two would crop up,” she said, slipping down from the desk with a grunt. “Racking up contribution points like nobody’s business. What in the Planes have you been up to?”

“We need something that will either cause a big distraction or help us be stealthy,” Sylph said. “The amount of points it costs is not important, and we don’t want to spend a bunch of time wandering around to find it. Do you have any suggestions?”

Auntie’s eyebrows crept up. “Would this have anything to do with the quest that Whisp assigned you?”

“You know about that?” Damien asked, a flicker of unease building. He instinctively reached for his Ether but didn’t make any moves.

“She swung by just a minute or two ago,” Auntie replied, putting her hands on her hips. “Apparently, you did something real big for her. She was pretty secretive about it, but you’ve apparently got a total of thirty seven thousand and fifty contribution points between the two of you.”

Damien let the Ether slip back to its natural state in his core. “That’s a lot.”

“Whisp is going to bankrupt us if she gives points out like this,” Auntie said irritably. “Woman’s drunk, I could smell it on her breath.”

“It’s for a good cause,” Damien said.

“I’d like to ask for suggestions a second time,” Sylph said. “We’ll pool our points. Is there anything behind the gold door that would be useful?”

“Of course, there would be,” Auntie snapped. “Those are some of the bests artifacts Blackmist has to offer.”

“What about something that explodes?” Damien asked, outstretching his hands. “And I mean a big explosion. Enough to bring down the attention of everyone in a small city.”

Auntie’s eye twitched. “Why do you need something like that? And, worse, why do you assume I’ve got it sitting around in the middle of Blackmist’s campus?”

Sylph cocked an eyebrow. “Are you telling me you don’t have anything like that? I’ve read that runed explosives have been used on the frontlines before.”

“I never said we didn’t have it,” Auntie said crossly. “You said you wanted something stealthy. How is an enormous bomb stealthy?”

Damien tapped his chin. “I went with a distraction instead. If they’re all running to an explosion, then they can’t see us.”

“I am going to elect not to address that logic,” Auntie said, rubbing her forehead. “Listen, give me some more information to work with so I can properly help you. You need to be secretive for some reason. Why? Are you sneaking past monsters? Into the girl’s bathroom? The boy’s bathroom? I don’t care, although I’d be *really* concerned if your first thought to peep was to use a bomb. I much prefer a portable window.”

“No bathrooms,” Damien said. He exchanged a glance with Sylph, then sighed. “A noble house.”

Auntie’s eyes widened. “Ah. Trying to prank a noble? You wouldn’t be the first, but a bomb is definitely overkill for that. You’d be much better off—and wouldn’t waste nearly as many contribution points—if you just got some shadow cloaks.”

“No,” Sylph said before Damien could even ask what those were. “They’ll fail under powerful Truesight wards.”

“What in the Planes are you going to be passing through Truesight wards for?” Auntie asked, aghast. “Those are just in treasuries and core rooms. Whatever you’re planning, it probably isn’t worth it. Just get a useful artifact that’ll actually help you in the long run.”

“We’re trying to rescue one of our friends who got kidnapped,” Damien said flatly. “We don’t have time to do anything else, so I’m going to have to ask that you either help us or open the door to the Pavilion so we can look around for ourselves.”

“Kidnapped? A Blackmist student?” Auntie asked, her face growing stormy. She bared her teeth and raised a hand into the air threateningly. “What little shitstain of a noble house thinks they can waltz in here and steal a student? I’ll crush them myself, boy. Who are they?”

“You can’t do anything,” Damien replied. “It’s the Grays.”

Auntie froze. They stared at each other for a few moments. Then, she turned around and pressed her palm to the golden door. Ether flowed from her palm, and a dozen *clicks* rang out from within it.

“You’re going to need a really big bomb if you want to distract them enough to do anything.”

The metal warped and bent inward, opening into an enormous hall. Glittering artifacts lined the walls and sat on pedestals. They ranged from massive swords to staves filled to the brim with so much Ether that Damien could practically taste it.

Auntie snapped her fingers, and the glass casing on one of the pedestals near the back of the room cracked, falling apart as a small orb floated out of it and flew over to land in her hands.

“This is meant for clearing out massive groups of powerful monsters,” Auntie said. “But it’ll do just as much of a number on walls, runed or not. I have to ask—how much damage do you plan to do with this? If you kill any major nobles...”

“We aren’t planning to kill anyone we don’t have to,” Damien said. “We’ll set the explosion off far enough away from any people that, hopefully, nobody will actually be harmed by it. It’s a distraction not the main offense.”

Auntie nodded. She handed the small sphere to Sylph, who took it gingerly.

“Send some Ether—it doesn’t matter what kind—into the activation rune on that,” Auntie said. “You’ll have a minute to get away from it after that. There’s no stopping it either. It’s not a stable weapon. It’s not meant to be. I would not be letting you buy that under any other circumstances.”

“How much was it?” Damien asked, mostly out of curiosity.

“More than what you had,” Auntie replied flatly. “Consider the rest of it a down payment on the safe return of one of Blackmist’s students. We don’t have many of these weapons, and the person who makes more is very rarely around. If it wasn’t just one time use, it would be one of the most expensive weapons in the armory. Students aren’t the only ones who can use Blackmist’s contribution points. In fact, the biggest users are adult mages on the frontlines. Now, get out of here. I’m going to have to do a lot of paperwork to explain where that bomb went.”

“We’ll put it to good use,” Damien promised. He paused for a moment. “I’m not sure if we’ll be recognized, but it might be safest for you to say you don’t have any recollection of us passing through if anyone comes to ask you.”

“I’ve already forgotten you were here,” Auntie said, waving a hand dismissively as she climbed back onto her desk. She caught Damien’s

glance at one of the guards and chuckled. “Oh, don’t you worry about them. They do exactly what I say and not anything more.”

The guards didn’t react, which Damien took as assent. He and Sylph stepped out of the Treasure Pavilion and headed toward the portal courtyard in the center of Blackmist’s campus.

“I just realized I have no idea where the Gray estate is,” Damien said, cursing and coming to a stop at the edge of the obsidian arches. “We’ll have to go ask Whisp.”

“No need. I know where they are,” Sylph said.

Damien jogged to catch up with her as she headed toward a portal at the edge of the square. “Why?”

“The Grays are one of the major noble houses in the kingdom,” Sylph replied, glancing over her shoulder at him. “If you recall my original profession, I needed to be able to deal with the princess. There was always a large chance she would have married into House Gray, which means I needed to know how to deal with them.”

“Duh. Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories,” Damien said as they came to a stop before one of the portals.

“It’s fine. They don’t matter anymore,” Sylph replied. She cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders. “The arrival portal should put us in the courtyard near the Gray estate, but it’s still guarded. As soon as we show up, teleport away. It takes the runes a few moments to recognize that you’re there. If you’re fast enough and the guards aren’t paying attention, they won’t even realize you’ve arrived.”

*Damn. She really does know exactly how to break into the Gray house. Sylph is amazing.*

“I don’t think that’s the response you’re supposed to have when someone tells you they know how to break into a heavily guarded noble house,” Henry observed.

Damien just grunted. Sylph stepped into the swirling disk of energy, and he followed after her. Something told him that the Grays would very strongly regret the day they decided to get rid of Loretta.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

As soon as the portal spat Damien out, he Warp Stepped straight upward. Nausea brushed at his senses, but he was so used to the feeling by now that it didn't even make him blink. Wind bit at his lips and Sylph appeared beside him, forming a disk of air beneath their feet.

An enormous courtyard stretched out far below them, full of beautifully trimmed bushes bristling with bright flowers. Arches lined the yard, a churning portal within each of them. Damien counted ten guards patrolling the area, but it was difficult to determine if they had noticed their arrival at the distance he was at.

“Good job,” Sylph said, squinting down at them. “I don’t think they noticed us.”

“How can you tell?”

“I’m modifying my eyes,” Sylph replied, staring past him at the ground. “I can control my entire body, remember? I spent some time seeing how bird eyes functioned, then learned to mimic them with the Corruption. It honestly does most of the work for me. It’s like it was meant to change shapes into other things— Oh, wait.”

They both snorted.

“They really didn’t see us arrive?” Damien asked.

“Nope. One of the guards is glancing around, but I think he wasn’t paying much attention. Most people wouldn’t be able to move that quickly after stepping out of a portal, so he’s probably already convinced himself that he didn’t see anything. People see what they want to see. It’s a very useful tool when you’re breaking into somewhere.”

“Noted.” Damien looked away from the courtyard to the surroundings. Behind the courtyard was a small, curated forest of beautiful trees. Just beyond that was a towering castle. Huge, gray brick walls rose several stories high and four towers at every corner scraped the clouds.

“That’s the Gray estate,” Sylph said.

“There aren’t all that many other things that it could have been,” Damien said dryly, scanning over it. “Where would Nolan be? That thing is huge. There’s no way we can just wander around it until we run into him.”

“I’m not sure,” Sylph replied. “But I do know where his father should be. The Grays aren’t royalty, but they sure do fancy themselves as such—at least, they did when I learned about them. There should be a throne room near the center of the keep. His father should be there.”

“Good idea. We can deal with his dad and force him to tell us where Nolan is,” Damien said. “Any idea how we’re supposed to get inside without bringing the entire place down on us?”

“It’ll be easy, to be honest. We’re not trying to break into anywhere secret, so most of their best defenses won’t even be an issue. Set the bomb off at one of the walls. It should do enough damage to draw most of the guards away. Nolan’s father should remain within the throne room, since it’s fairly well defended, along with his guard. We just show up, deal with them, and we’ve got what we need.”

“Perfect,” Damien said. “I’ll deliver the bomb. Meet you at the top of the farthest wall? I assume we want to be as far from the explosion as possible.”

“Don’t forget Auntie said it takes a minute to go off.”

“I won’t,” Damien promised. He stepped off the edge of the wind disk and Warp Stepped, appearing on the ground at the base of the wall in an instant. As soon as his feet were on the ground, his hand was in his bag, pulling the bomb out.

He sent a pulse of Ether into the bomb, and the runes at the entry point lit a dull white. With every passing second, light slowly scrawled across it, filling the runes in. Damien set the bomb at the base of the wall and stepped back.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

Damien cursed, looking up toward the source of the noise. A guard stood at the top of the wall, staring down at him. He glanced back at the bomb—there were still around forty seconds before it went off.

“Pick that up,” the guard yelled. “No littering at the base of the Gray estate. And how did you get there? This is protected land, kid.”

Damien gritted his teeth. He didn’t know exactly how large the explosion would be, but he doubted anyone standing directly above it would survive the blast. He cursed and Warp Stepped, appearing on the wall beside the guard.

“Holy sh—”

Damien’s elbow slammed into the guard’s temple, and the man crumpled to the ground. His helm rang off the parapets with a *clang*, and Damien caught him a moment later with a wince. A tingle erupted on the back of his neck, and he spun, casting Devour.

A thick stream of fire scorched through the air. It hit the disk of black energy and vanished within it, fading away. The guard it had come from gathered the Ether and started to throw another spell in Damien’s direction.

He Warp Stepped, driving his palm into the man’s chest and throwing him into the wall. The guard cried out but managed to hold onto his spell. A lance of flame shot out, but it vanished into another Devour harmlessly.

“Who are you?” the guard asked, glancing around desperately.

Damien didn’t reply. He didn’t have time to. He’d lost count of how long was left on the bomb, which was still at the base of the wall. Teleporting once again, he slammed his fist against the guard’s helmet. It rang like a bell, and the man crumpled to the ground.

He grabbed the man and glanced over the other side of the wall. The inside of the Gray estate really did look like a castle—there was an entire miniature ecosystem within it. Several small houses were directly on the other side of the wall, and beyond them was what he suspected to be a market.

The far side of the estate was probably where the actual Gray family lived. A large, beautiful mansion stretched out across the castle grounds, covering nearly half of them with its two enormous wings.

At their center was a big, circular building—likely where Nolan’s father sat. Damien cursed again, then teleported the guard in his hands to the ground in the center of the market. He sprinted back along the wall, doing the same to the other guard.

“What in the Planes are you doing?” yet another guard yelled, fumbling at his belt as he turned the corner of the wall to see his fellows vanishing from Damien’s hands.

Ether surged in Damien's chest, and he Warp Stepped again, appearing beside the man and Warp Stepping with him. They both appeared in the center of the market, beside the other guards and a small, building crowd of surprised onlookers.

An instant later, the sky turned yellow. Damien thrust his hands into the air as an earthshattering crash split the air and the ground bucked. He created an enormous portal above the market, just moments before rubble from the wall shot toward them, peppering the unprotected buildings and tearing them to pieces.

He waited for an instant longer, then let the portal fade. Smoke rose from a massive hole in the wall, and the stone connected to it continued to crumble and fall away. Flames licked across the stone and the grass on the other side of the wall, quickly spreading to the rest of the forest. Runes flickered and died along the wall as they failed to resist the amount of structural damage the explosion had done.

The effect traveled along the walls, vanishing beyond their vision. Damien grimaced. He didn't want to think about how many years of work had just been undone in just a few instants. The guard he'd grabbed scrambled away from him, his eyes wide in terror.

“Please, don't hurt me. I'm just a hire, I swear.”

Damien ignored him. He turned and Warp Stepped once again, appearing on the far side of the wall just as the cacophony of alarm bells started to fill the air. Several guards already lay on the ground, unconscious.

His senses picked Sylph up just beside him an instant before she allowed her camouflage to fade away.

“That was bigger than I expected,” Sylph said. More smoke rose from the hole now, and a second crash shook the castle as one of the towers creaked, its base heavily damaged from the blast, and toppled over, smashing into the forest below.

“You've got no idea. The runes on the walls must have taken the brunt of that explosion,” Damien said. “I saved a few of the guards, but...how many did we just kill?”

“The walls are solid, so nobody was inside them unless someone was in a stairwell leading up to them,” Sylph replied. “Aside from the tower, you didn't blow up anything that looked like a guardroom. Anyone caught by that blast will probably be fine. The Grays are certain to have some very powerful healing mages.”

Damien nodded, his eyes going cold. “Right. Let’s go. Lead the way, Sylph.”

“Just try to keep up. We want to keep the casualties down. These mages are going to be useful for the fight against the Corruption. Just make sure you don’t put yourself at risk. You’re more important than they are.”

“Likewise,” Damien said.

Sylph let out a dark chuckle as her body faded away, consumed by her camouflage spell. “I was made for this, Damien. I’m not at any risk from a bunch of guards who have never seen a real fight.”

“Yeah,” Henry added. “Don’t kill the fun. I want to see things explode.”

Damien rolled his eyes, ignoring Henry. His senses tracked Sylph as she leapt off the edge of the wall and ran through the air, heading toward the circular building at the center of the Gray estate. Damien Warp Stepped after her, appearing near the door just a few instants before Sylph arrived.

To his surprise, Sylph emerged from her camouflage. She opened the door and strode inside confidently, not even bothering to draw her weapons. Damien followed after her, jogging for a moment to catch up.

“What are we doing?” he hissed. A guard dashed past them, a sword drawn. Sylph’s face changed, shifting to that of a terrified schoolgirl. The guard’s eyes brushed over them, and he continued on, not stopping.

“Nobody is going to bat an eye at two college-aged students walking around in the Gray estate’s public floor,” Sylph replied once the guard was out of sight. “We can just act scared until we get somewhere better defended.”

“That seems too easy.”

“You’d be surprised how easy it is to get places when you don’t look out of place. The average person has no idea who they’re protecting anyone from,” Sylph replied, jogging off down the center of the hall. Damien followed her, the droning scream of the alarms outside still ringing in his ears.

Several more guards passed them, and one barked out directions for the nearest safe room, but none stopped to actually press the two for questions. Sylph took Damien through the beautifully decorated halls, passing by stone busts of mages, inscribed with names and descriptions of their ‘great deeds’ for House Gray.

A few minutes of travel later, Sylph held her hand up and they both slowed to a stop at a corner. She rippled, fading from view for a few

moments.

“The main hall is just down this turn,” Sylph said. “It’s closed, as we expected. Nelson Gray’s personal guard is likely to be with him, and they’ll be a lot more powerful than the rabble they have hired to protect the walls.”

“Nelson? Is that Nolan’s dad’s name?”

“Yes,” Sylph said. “If it was just me, I could probably sneak in there silently. I don’t think I can do that with you, though. We’re going to have to be more direct.”

“That was always the plan,” Damien replied, rolling his neck. “Besides, I like direct. It gets things accomplished much faster.”

“Be careful. Nelson is a powerful battle mage in his own right,” Sylph warned. “I’ll stay camouflaged at the start and try to non-lethally take out as many of them as I can before they figure out I’m there.”

Damien nodded. Henry stretched out of his shadow, rising up to loom over Damien in his Full Manifestation. He wrapped himself around Damien, melting into his mage armor and turning it black.

Ether hissed around Damien as he pulled it into himself. He overloaded a gravity sphere and stepped around the corner, coming to face a pair of huge double doors reinforced with twisting metal. They were beautiful.

Damien threw the gravity sphere. It struck the doors and went off with a loud, rending *screech*, ripping the metal apart. He strode up to one of the doors and slammed his foot into it, casting Reduce on the piece through his heel.

The door shrunk, ripping itself off the hinges. Still warped and heavily damaged from the spell, it returned to its normal size as it crashed to the ground and skidded across a fine red carpet. Damien stepped into the room, directly across from a tall man with a neatly trimmed gray beard sitting in a padded throne.

“Nelson Gray,” Damien growled, his senses picking up six guards scattered throughout the room. He extended his hand, and a portal snapped open in the center of the room. The ravaged corpses of the assassins he had killed tumbled into the room, the pieces of their bodies making a small pile on the velvet floor. “I think these belong to you.”

## CHAPTER

# EIGHT

“Who in the Planes are you?” Nelson asked, not moving from his makeshift throne. Two of his guards stood at either side of him, while the rest were scattered throughout the throne room. Damien couldn’t see all of them, but he could feel them.

Ether crackled in the air as the mages drew on it, calling so much that it tingled across Damien’s skin. They certainly weren’t of the same caliber as any of the guards on the outer walls.

Damien kept his own magic at the ready, prepared to cast Devour at a moment’s notice. He felt Sylph moving through the room, making her way toward a guard hiding behind a pillar on the second floor.

“Does it really matter who I am?” Damien asked, continuing forward. Henry’s presence brushed across the warm light filling the room. Shadows flickered along the edges of the hall, and the lanterns dimmed just enough to be noticeable.

Several of the guards shifted, but they were well trained. None of them moved, clearly waiting for a command from Nelson.

“Considering you’re likely the reason that the alarm bells are going off throughout my estate, I believe it does,” Nelson replied, his hands tightening on the beautifully carved armrests of his seat. “Are you with the Bloodwing house?”

Damien snorted. “I’m not with any of the other noble houses, Nelson. I don’t think I could have been farther from it, actually. If anything, had I been asked a few days ago, I would have said that the house I was closest with would have been the Grays.”

“What, an offshoot branch?” Nelson asked, eyes narrow. “Why are you attacking the Gray estate? And I trust you realize the futility of your actions now that you’ve arrived here. You won’t be walking out of this room alive without my say so. While you may have shown me that our defenses are lacking, you’ll find that my inner sanctum is considerably better defended than the rest of this house. Of course, it’s clear you’ve already determined that or you would have attacked already.”

“I couldn’t care less about your guards,” Damien lied. There actually were quite a few of them, and from the Ether radiating off their bodies, they weren’t pushovers. He was confident he could defeat them with Henry’s help, but not without killing more people than he wanted to. They didn’t have the manpower to spare against the Corruption, and wiping out the honor guard of one of the strongest noble houses certainly wouldn’t help that.

On the second floor, Damien felt the Ether that one of the guards was using flicker and fade. He hadn’t even made a single noise, but Sylph must have dealt with him. Damien kept the grin from his lips. If he kept Nelson talking for long enough, there wouldn’t be any guards left to fight in a few minutes.

“How confident, even if it is nothing more than bravado,” Nelson said, leaning forward as anger crossed his features. “So, tell me, then. What purpose do you have for coming here?”

“I already told you,” Damien said. He nodded to the bodies on the ground. “I was returning your men. Since your memory seems to be failing you, I’ll provide a refresher. They attempted to kill a student attending Blackmist.”

Nelson shrugged. “It must have been someone lower in the line of the Gray family. I gave no such order, and anyone who believes I did was mistaken. I will see to it that they are properly admonished. Was this person who was killed of any importance? I will ensure that their family is paid appropriately for their unfortunate loss.”

*What, he’s going to pretend that the agents were told to do this by someone else pretending to act under his orders so he doesn’t have to deal with the fallout?*

“You misunderstand,” Damien replied. “They didn’t succeed. I killed them before they were able to finish going through with their task. That is

quite fortunate, as I do not think the queen would approve of a student's execution when the entire kingdom is on the brink of war."

"The subject hardly matters at this point. If they survived, there was no harm done, even if these men believed they were acting on orders I did not give," Nelson said, drumming his fingers on the throne. "So? Is that all you came here for? I can promise you, even if I let you survive this conversation, the queen will not look kindly on anyone who attacks the Gray household. I heard the destruction. Those are not the actions of a group who seeks peace."

*Ah, that's it. He thinks I'm with a bunch of other people trying to attack him, so he's keeping me here to try and get information. That's why he's willing to talk. Old bastard is smarter than he looks—or he would have been if I'd had anyone with me other than you and Sylph.*

"I think the queen will understand," Damien said with a dry smile. Another guard's Ether vanished, leaving only four left. The two flanking Nelson were probably impossible for Sylph to take care of quietly, but the other two stood behind on a raised platform above the doorway. If Sylph was fast enough, she could probably remove both before anyone noticed she was there. "Let me change my questions, then. Where is Nolan?"

Nelson's eyebrows rose. "Nolan? What does he have to do with this?"

There was some genuine interest in his words at that. Damien's lips quirked.

"Everything. He's the only reason I'm here. Actually, if we're going to be honest with ourselves, he's also the reason you sent assassins after a student with no connections to your family."

Nelson studied Damien's face for a moment, gauging the truth of his words. Then, he bared his teeth in the beginning of a snarl. "Nolan hired mages outside the family? You're a mercenary? The boy has completely lost his way."

"Wrong again, I'm afraid," Damien replied. "Nolan didn't hire me. In fact, the only reason he made contact with me is because of what he's told me are your teachings. Make friends with the strong, right? You should be proud of him."

"Enough of this." Nelson's hands clenched into fists, and he rose to his feet. "I'll pry the information out of Nolan once your foul presence has been removed from my throne. If the boy thinks he can undermine the Gray

legacy over some worthless commoner, then both you and he are sorely mistaken.”

“So, you do admit to sending the assassins after Loretta?” Damien asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Above him, the Ether belonging to the two guards vanished. This time, there was a faint *thump* as one of their bodies hit the ground. Nelson’s eyes widened as he finally realized over half of his guards had been taken out during the conversation.

“It’s an ambush! Kill the intruder!”

A dark stretch of Ether painted across the air before Damien, snapping open and devouring two bolts of brilliant white light that leapt from the guards’ hands. Damien Warp Stepped, and Henry’s influence washed out over the room, covering the ground in a pool of black.

He appeared behind the guard on Nelson’s right, and Henry peeled off his back, vanishing into the shadows beneath them. Damien detonated a Gravity Sphere on the guard’s leg as the man started to turn.

The spell went off with a rush of wind, and several bones in the man’s leg snapped. He staggered, managing to keep his balance. Ether formed into a burning blade in his hand, and he slashed down at Damien’s neck.

Henry’s hand extended from the darkness, grabbing the blade and shattering it. Another one grabbed the guard by the neck. He flared with energy, momentarily blinding everyone in the room.

An instant later, all the light in the room twisted and spiraled down into a single point. Color and image drained away until there was only darkness. Damien shook his head, ripping himself free of the grip of the illusion. He brought his hand down forcefully on the back of the blinded man’s neck, sending the man crumpling to the ground.

He turned to deal with the other man, but he was already collapsed on the ground, Sylph standing above him. Damien put a foot on Nelson’s chest and slammed the man back into his chair. Judging by his terrified expression, Sylph had already removed his access to the Ether. The darkness slowly faded, and color returned to the room.

“Who are you?” Nelson asked, his voice trembling. “What magic is this?”

Henry rose from the pool of Ether covering the ground, his wings extended behind his back. They folded in as his featureless face creased in a grin and he let out a raspy laugh.

“I think the nobles abilities might have been talked up a little,” Henry said, his voice reverted back to the myriad of tones that Damien associated with Herald. “These creatures were pathetic.”

“I won’t ask you again,” Damien said, leaning forward. “Where is Nolan?”

“Rot in the Plane of the Dead,” Nelson spat. “Find the boy and extract your price yourself. If the fool betrayed his house, than he can reap the fruit of his mistakes on his own. I won’t help you.”

Damien rolled his eyes. “I’m not working with him to destroy House Gray, although I can’t deny that the thought is tempting. If the kingdom didn’t need your strength, I’d bury you in an unmarked plot. Only a monster would order the death of someone their son was dating simply because of their origin.”

Nelson bared his teeth at Damien, regaining some of his previous confidence. “Or perhaps you aren’t allowed to kill me, boy. Are you bound by some contract that ensures Nolan is here to deal the final blow and take control of House Gray? Yes, I think you are. That’s why you want the boy.”

Damien’s eye twitched. It was *really* tempting to kill the man, but he resisted the urge. A small, weak voice in the back of his mind insisted that killing Nelson was the wrong path.

A scythe ran along the ground behind Sylph, trailing up to Nelson’s fingers. “I could save us some time. A healer can always put him together later.”

“I don’t want you to have to put yourself through that,” Damien replied. “He’s not worth the effort.”

Footfalls entered the room before Nelson could say anything. Damien glanced over his shoulder as Nolan strode into the room, his green armor donned and covered in thin stone armor. A small wisp of purple energy shot away from him and entered Henry.

“I figured I’d send something out to look for him while the three of you chatted,” Henry said cheerfully. “Aren’t I fantastic?”

“Not now,” Damien said. “Nolan, are you okay?”

“My traitorous son,” Nelson growled. “So, this was all your doing? You hid your hand well. I actually believed you meant to give up your claim to lead House Gray.”

“Traitorous?” Nolan asked, his noble features creasing in fury. “I heard from Blackmist, Father. You sent assassins for Loretta.”

“They’re dead,” Damien put in. “Sylph and I took care of them.”

“Good men wasted to a fool’s plans,” Nolan spat. “I had no plans to take the throne, Father. Perhaps a few years ago, but not anymore. I just wanted to study magic at Blackmist. If you’d let me do as I want, Damien wouldn’t be here now.”

Nelson bared his teeth and spat on the ground. “Do it, then. Take control of House Gray and do what you want. Just as I did. No commoner scum will ever be of the proper breed to take the throne beside you, Nolan. If you choose one of such worthless stock, she will break. You need a powerful marriage, not one to a useless sow with middling magic.”

Nolan’s hands tightened. “Damien, could I speak with my father for a moment?”

Damien shrugged and took his foot off Nelson’s chest, stepping back. “I’m not sure what you think you’re going to tell him that’ll change his mind. He’s like you when we first met, but a thousand times worse.”

Nolan’s eyes were cold as he walked up to stand before Nelson. The rock covering his body rippled and churned with anger.

“Just going to stare, boy?” Nelson asked, rising to his feet and looking down at Nolan. “Or are you going to order your hound to kill me for you?”

“You’ve lost your way. Maybe you never had one,” Nolan said. “I only wanted to be free of this. I hated the courts. I hate everything about this.”

“Then leave,” Nelson said, his grin growing larger. “Prove yourself to be the coward that I appear to have raised despite my best efforts. At least Reena shows promise. She will have to take House Gray in your place.”

“And what of Loretta?” Sylph asked, her scythe still hovering next to Nelson.

“I won’t waste any more resources on a peasant,” Nelson said with a snort. “Nolan will never be able to show his face in front of any of the houses again, not if he’s truly set on this choice. There’s a reason we separate our lines.”

“No,” Nolan said.

Nelson raised an eyebrow. “No? What, do you want your inheritance before you leave? It’ll be put to good use elsewhere, boy. This is what you wanted. Take it and leave. This issue is done.”

He stepped forward, stone rushing down his hand and forming into his massive blade. It fell through the air like a wall of rock, and Nelson’s face only had an instant to show surprise. Then, he was gone. The blood-covered

stone melted away, sinking back into the earth, and Nelson's body fell back onto the throne with a wet *splat*. It slumped down, blood trickling down the seat and pooling beneath it. The sword had split the back of the chair down the middle, leaving it like a V.

Nolan stared at the body of his father, his hands trembling. The sword melted from his hands, and he drew a rattling breath, his fingers twitching for a moment before he let it out slowly. He wiped a sleeve across his face and set his jaw. "Had to do it. I had to."

He glanced at Damien and Sylph, his eyes watery. Then, he blinked, and all that remained was steel. "Forgive me. I think I'm starting to lose track of the favors I owe you, but I need one more thing."

"I really don't care about favors. What is it?"

Nolan's eyes remained steely as he told the two what he needed. When he finished, Damien gave him a curt nod. As he and Sylph walked out of the throne room, he couldn't help but feel that Nolan was more suited to lead one of the greatest noble houses than he thought.

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## CHAPTER NINE

Just six days later, it was done. It had been years since a noble was last overthrown by their own children—a practice that had fallen out of favor after the current queen had taken her throne from her mother—but, evidently, it was one that still held weight with the noble families.

Nolan seized control of the Gray family with ruthless determination. He had the news of his father's demise at his hands spread across the kingdom and immediately replaced the honor guard with men of his own choosing. If the queen had issue with the new ruler of House Gray, she never made it publicly known.

As soon as the roots of his control had been established, he set about commissioning repairs for the damage Damien and Sylph had done to the walls. Very few even tried to oppose him, and the ones who did didn't hold out for long when Henry made his presence known.

Nelson had taught Nolan well—perhaps a little too well. Several other noble houses sent emissaries congratulating him on his newfound status, some asking when he would be looking to open previously closed trade agreements or settle disputes that had arisen when Nelson controlled the Grays.

He handled himself better than most would have, by Damien's standards. Nolan treated everyone with a cold but polite demeanor and, before long, it became quite clear that nobody would be trying to interfere in his rise to power.

When the last of all the visiting messengers had left and Noland dismissed his guard, he slumped in his still-split throne, running his hands through his hair and letting out a heavy sigh.

“That should just about handle it. Everyone thinks I’ve got some terrifying mages backing me, and the queen has yet to address the death of my father. That means she doesn’t care, which legitimizes me. I’m the head of House Gray now, whether I want to be or not.”

“You don’t say that like it’s a good thing,” Damien said, emerging from behind the throne. Shadows rose behind him—he’d spent some time practicing in between helping Nolan corral the visiting nobles—and formed into two chairs. He sat in one, and Sylph materialized in the other as she dropped her camouflage.

“It’s not exactly what I wanted, but I don’t think there was much of a choice. There was no way my father was going to let Loretta live, and he would have forced Reena to go through what I did. I did what I had to. I want to see her again, but I don’t know when I can. Everywhere is dangerous for her right now.”

“Don’t worry. She’s safe. You’ll be able to see her again after all this shit is handled. And, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” Damien said. “Nobody should have to fight their father.”

A small grin flickered across Nolan’s face. “You would know, huh?”

“For what it’s worth, Nelson seems like he had it coming. Stormsword is just a loyal dog.”

Nolan nodded. “Still, I sympathize. And I appreciate you wasting six days of your time, especially given how things are going right now. I know you’ve got better things to do, but I’ll make it up to you. The Gray family has a sizable militia. I’ll be putting out orders to increase their funding and training so they can help against the Corruption properly.”

“Aren’t all the noble houses already doing that?” Sylph asked. “I was under the impression that the queen had ordered everyone to prepare for war. That’s why she had us training people how to fight the Corruption.”

Nolan gave her a one-shouldered shrug and leaned back with a sigh. “They’re doing something, all right. I just doubt it’s as much as the queen said to. My father was strongly of the opinion that the Corruption was nothing more than a few monsters that had slipped past the frontlines, and many noble houses shared his thoughts. They’ll be readying men, but more to protect their estates than to set out to war.”

“Figures,” Sylph said. “I’m surprised they’d go against the queen, though.”

“They probably won’t do anything directly against her, but it’s very easy to cut corners until a cubical order turns into a sphere, if you know what I mean. There’s only so much control the queen has over the direct actions of nobles when we aren’t at war. They’ll listen to her if there’s some immediate obvious threat or if she’s physically present, but she’s just one woman—even with Stormsword going around to enforce her orders.”

“I’m not so sure the Corruption can even be eliminated through normal fighting,” Damien said, his face darkening. “It spreads too quickly. We need to kill Second and find a way to get it off the Mortal Plane.”

“Well, as I said, I’ll do what I can to help. Just tell me what you need. Until then, I’ll focus on trying to get our mages strong enough to protect the land around us,” Nolan said. He grimaced and pushed himself out of the throne. “I don’t feel right sitting in that.”

“What about Blackmist?” Sylph asked.

Nolan’s shoulders slumped. “Done for me, I’m afraid. There’s no way I can return to it now. I have to run the Gray house, and I’m not just going to abandon everyone here. A lot of people rely on us for their jobs and protection. By killing my father, I took that duty onto myself. I’ll seek out a tutor to make sure my magical knowledge doesn’t fall too much behind.”

“You don’t think you could do both at once?” Damien asked.

“There just isn’t enough time in the day. There are too many things to do, and I have a responsibility to my house now.” Nolan shook his head and chuckled. “It’s fine. Things are better this way. Reena won’t have to keep getting more involved in politics, which is for the best. She needs to focus on her studies. She’s a terrible politician anyway. She’ll be much better off as a mage, which is what she wanted to do when she wasn’t doing her best to impress Father.”

“Wait, is she going to be angry? About all of this?” Sylph gestured around the damaged throne room.

“About my father’s death? Probably. She really did want to become head of the Gray family, and I kind of stole that from her,” Nolan replied. “But it’s for the best. If she can actually dedicate her time to studying magic instead of wasting it, I think she’d be a better mage than me. Once this whole thing blows over, maybe I’ll try to find time to catch up.”

“You’re sure?” Damien asked. “We could talk to Whisp and try to see if there’s something we could work out.”

“Don’t. I’ve just got too much on my plate now. And, trust me. You’re going to need the support from my end in the coming days. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about the queen, but I haven’t had time with all the shit we’ve had to do to get House Gray under control.”

“What do you mean?”

“Damien, you and Sylph are very clearly outpacing the rest of the students in Blackmist—not to mention the other colleges. On top of that, you’re clearly involved with the Corruption and know more than most. The queen isn’t blind—and she’s been in power this long because she knows how to consolidate power. You two are both powerful assets, and neither of you really need anything from her.”

“Why’s that a problem?” Damien asked. “Everything we’re doing is already helping the kingdom, and it’s not like either of us are trying to get a seat in court or something. I doubt we’ll ever meet.”

Nolan snorted. “You will. Just be careful around her. I’ve only met her a few times, and while she seemed kind enough, I know she’ll do just about anything she has to in order to protect the kingdom. I’m not about to go telling anyone, but I know something isn’t exactly right about Henry. I haven’t looked into it, but if she finds out there’s something there that poses a threat...”

“Noted,” Damien said, nodding his understanding. “I’ll do my best to stay away from her.”

“Then, you should probably head back to Blackmist,” Nolan said, rising from his throne and brushing his clothes off with a grimace. “You’ve already done more than enough here. It’s not fair to make you do more, and I think I can handle the rest myself now. As long as people think I’m backed by you, I’ve essentially got Stormsword’s unspoken backing as well. I’m well aware that isn’t the case, but the other nobles don’t know that.”

Sylph laughed. “That’s pretty devious. Especially since the queen hasn’t said anything. If Stormsword backs someone, then so does she.”

“Exactly,” Nolan nodded. “Still, I’m far from the first to try to curry favor by knowing people. The queen hasn’t done anything yet, so I think we’re clear of this one.”

“Well, reach out if you need our help,” Damien said, rising with Sylph. “I’m sorry to hear you won’t be able to stay at Blackmist.”

“Likewise,” Nolan said, extending a hand. Damien grasped it. “But I’m glad I was sent there in the first place. It’s funny. My father didn’t buy me

and Reena into Kingsfront as a punishment for failing to properly follow his orders, but I think that might have been one of the best things that happened to me. I'll do my best to find time to visit soon but, until then, would you be able to tell Loretta what happened? I don't want her to think that I've just run off."

"That's not a problem," Sylph said. "But...what do you want us to say? If you're not coming back..."

"My feelings haven't changed," Nolan said, his gaze hardening. "But I don't want to push her anymore. She's gone through more than she should have ever had to because of my family. If she doesn't want to keep things the way they were, I'd understand."

"I can bring her here right now," Damien offered. "It wouldn't be difficult in the slightest."

"Bad idea." Nolan shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, but she might feel obligated to answer in some way if you bring her here. Let her recoup at Blackmist until she's comfortable. If possible, please just tell her my feelings."

"We'll talk to her," Damien promised. He wanted to assure Nolan that there was no way Loretta would want to change anything, but he honestly wasn't sure if that was the case. He didn't know much about his friend's relationship, which made him slightly ashamed. Nolan clearly held him in high esteem, but he was so withdrawn from the lives of most of the other students that he wasn't sure that it was his place to claim knowledge about how any of them would think. The most he could do was pass Nolan's message on.

"Thanks," Nolan said. He remained silent for several moments, his eyes roaming over the damaged throne room before they finally returned to Damien. "I'm going to go help with some of the wall repairs. The portal courtyard is still fully functional, so feel free to use it to return to Blackmist. Everyone already knows you've got passage anywhere in the Gray estate."

"We will. Stay safe, Nolan," Damien said.

"You two more than me," Nolan replied with a chuckle, raising a hand in farewell. He headed out of the throne room, leaving them alone. Sylph put a hand on Damien's shoulder.

"You're feeling a bit of it, aren't you?"

"Of what?"

“Out of place.”

Damien blinked, a thought striking him. “A bit. Is this how you’ve always felt?”

“For a long time, yeah.”

“Do you just...ignore it? It feels like I’m not treating Nolan the way I should be. I mean, sure, we’re helping him out a lot, but am I really acting like a friend should? I couldn’t even tell him that everything would be fine with Loretta.”

“You’re doing what you can,” Sylph replied. “And we’re fighting the Corruption so Nolan gets a chance to even have this trouble. If we weren’t, the Cycle would be reset and that would be it for all of us.”

Damien nodded and pressed his lips together. “You’re right. Maybe we’ll get to work on getting to really spend some time with the people we’ve met once Second has been dealt with.”

“We will. Shall we collect Loretta and to Blackmist?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Their passage through the portal courtyard went uncontested. If any of the guards cared about who they were, they didn't let on. Everyone kept a wide berth around the two students as they strode into the swirling portals and vanished, returning to Blackmist.

As Damien emerged from the portal, his senses alerted him to Whisp's presence an instant before he opened his eyes.

"That," Whisp said, drumming her fingers on her thigh, "was not what I meant when I said to deal with the assassins."

"Oops," Damien said flatly.

Whisp sighed. "Just what I need. Snark. Well, I don't think I can tell you good job without getting reprimanded by the queen. I don't reckon she wants us encouraging patricide."

"Does anyone know the details?" Sylph asked.

"Of the extent of your involvement? Most don't. Nobody knows exactly what happened, but the fact of the matter is that Nolan is now the head of House Gray after killing his father, aided by the two of you. I mean, seriously. Are you capable of going anywhere without killing someone?"

"You know, I've started to ask myself that same question," Damien said. "Luckily, we didn't actually kill anyone this time. I think."

"You don't sound too torn up about that," Whisp observed.

"I'm finding it harder to care. I don't understand why we're fighting against each other when the Corruption is getting stronger every day. It's a waste of time and effort we can't afford to spare."

Whisp grunted. "Can't say I disagree. You know, I've seen that look on mages that came back from the frontlines. Never on a student, though—

much less two of them.”

“Always glad to be unique,” Damien deadpanned. “I should tell you that I don’t think Nolan will be returning soon. His new duties as the head of House Gray are going to be taking up his time.”

Whisp’s eyes narrowed. “I had gathered as much. Disappointing. He was a good student.”

“You know, I can never tell if you care or not,” Sylph said. “Sometimes, it feels like you hate this job. At other times, you almost resemble a good dean.”

Whisp let out a sharp bark of laughter. “I take it back. I might actually prefer it when you little shits are upfront with what you think. It’s so much more refreshing than when you’re dancing around what you actually think. And, to answer your implied question, it depends on if I’m drunk or not.”

“That’s not reassuring in the slightest. Is there something you want from us? Because, if not, I think I’d like to be left alone,” Damien said.

“Help yourself,” Whisp said, stepping to the side and gesturing for them to pass. “I think you’ve done enough. I’ll send someone to swing by and fill you in on your classes this semester. The ranking battles from last year got postponed, so they’ll be happening early this year instead.”

Damien paused as they passed Whisp. He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Seriously? I don’t mean to act cocky, but is there even a point for Sylph and me to participate in those? There aren’t any students in our year that can match us. Planes, is there even anyone in Year Three or Four? Aven graduated. I guess there’s Cheese, but he’s...special.”

“Don’t undersell Mark,” Whisp said. “He’s got more strength than you give him credit for. And Aven has decided to stick around as a teacher’s assistant. She’ll be participating in the tournament, as will you.”

“Why should we bother?” Damien asked.

“Because it brings attention,” Whisp said, her features darkening. “I’m not an idiot, Damien. I know that you and Sylph are far stronger than you have any right to be. I will not be investigating the reason why, because I suspect I won’t like the answer. But, do you know why the kingdom is still pattering around playing politics instead of gearing for war? It’s because the threat of the Corruption isn’t taken as seriously as it should be yet.”

“You mean to change that?” Sylph asked, catching onto the tone of Whisp’s voice.

Whisp grunted. “No. I follow the queen’s orders, and she believes the threat is currently properly addressed—but she is no fool and has encouraged spending any resources that we do still have in training students in preparation for if the Corruption grows stronger. Most of our strongest fighters are still on the frontlines, keeping the hordes from breaking into the kingdom.”

“But—”

“*Delph*, on the other hand, believes this is a bigger problem than what we’re treating it as,” Whisp continued, raising a finger in the air. “And he’s going to arrange for a demonstration to show just how serious this threat is. When better to do that than a tournament than when thousands of people are gathered to watch?”

It was Damien’s turn to let out a round of laughter. “Seriously? You’re going to make us crush a bunch of students just so we can fight the Corruption at the end of the ranking battles?”

“No. We both know there’s no point for you or Sylph to participate in the normal tournament. You’ll be the closing act. *Delph* seems confident that he can set something up that’ll get people aware, and you seem to be part of that. He hopes to convince the queen that the threat is even larger than she believes.”

“Lovely. I don’t suppose he’s going to tell us more than that?” Damien asked.

Whisp snorted. “You don’t know him very well at all if you think he’s going to share information with us. I can’t control the bastard any more than you can. Maybe even less, actually. He’s still carrying around an artifact that should be locked away.”

“Couldn’t imagine what that one is,” Sylph said exchanging a glance at Damien.

“Forget it,” Whisp said wearily. “I don’t care anymore. I just want to survive through the next year or two. Happenstance is meant to return soon, and then I can do the job I actually signed up for rather than playing dean. Try not to destroy Blackmist before then, okay?”

“No promises,” Damien said, and he half-meant it. “Good luck with setting the tournament up. We’ll speak with *Delph* ourselves. I’m not going to just blindly do what he wants, but the idea of bringing more attention to the Corruption seems like a good one.”

Whisp pulled a flask from her side, taking a long drink from it before raising her other hand in farewell and launching into the air. She wobbled slightly, swerving past a tower, and shot off toward campus.

“She’s got a problem,” Sylph said as she and Damien set off. Damien nodded in mute agreement.

Once they had put some distance between themselves and where Whisp had been, Damien stopped. He stepped into a nearby alley, ducking into the shadows where nobody could see them.

“I’m going to get Loretta back,” he said. “Keep an eye out so nobody sees me fiddling with the portal. I doubt anyone will recognize it, but it’s better safe than sorry.”

“You realize Whisp can almost certainly detect Void magic if she’s anywhere near you, right?” Henry asked in Damien’s mind. “Like, that’s the whole reason I wasn’t using my abilities for the first two years we were here.”

*She has to already suspect it. I just don’t think she cares. I already used it once, so I might as well get Loretta out so she isn’t sitting around there any longer than she needs to be.*

Damien channeled the Void, carving the jagged runes through the air with his finger. Energy bucked against his will as it was forced into the spell, and a black portal churned open before him.

A cold wind rushed out of it as Moon’s hideaway appeared on the other end. Loretta sat against one of the walls, her knees pulled up against her chest and her hands wrapped around them. Her eyes lit up at the sight of them, and she leapt to her feet.

“It’s safe? Already?” Loretta asked, rushing through the portal to stand beside them in the alley. It snapped shut behind her with a hiss.

“All potential assassins are dead and no more will be coming after you,” Damien confirmed. He paused for a moment, searching for the right words. “Uh...Nolan might not be coming back to Blackmist, though.”

“What? Why?” Loretta exclaimed. Her eyes widened. “Oh, no. he’s not injured, is he?”

“He’s safe,” Sylph said, “but he had to take some drastic actions to deal with his father, who put the hit on your head.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Loretta asked with a frown, still shivering slightly from the cold.

“Nolan killed him,” Damien said, giving up on finding a better way to say it. “He took over House Gray and probably isn’t going to have time to attend college in the near future. He’s going to be too focused on keeping their house safe.”

“It isn’t entirely your fault,” Sylph added. “I think he did it because he realized that his father was going to lead their house to its grave. He’d lost it.”

Loretta bit her lower lip, her eyes darting between them to see if they were joking. When it became clear that they weren’t, she swallowed. “I—Oh.”

“He wanted me to say that he still feels the same way about you, but he doesn’t want to force you into a decision one way or another and understands whatever you end up wanting to do,” Damien said.

Loretta’s eyes narrowed. “What? He thinks that getting assassins sent after me is going to change my mind? Or that I see him differently now because he’s the head of House Gray?”

Damien raised his hands defensively. “Don’t ask me, I don’t know. But, for what it’s worth, he does care. It’s pretty obvious.”

Loretta scrunched her nose in anger. “Yeah, I know he does. Doesn’t mean he gets to have someone else talk to me in his place.”

“The portal to the Gray Estate is still active,” Sylph offered up. “You could just go confront him yourself if you want. He’s probably busy, but I think he’ll make time.”

“I think I will,” Loretta said, clenching her hands. She paused, then glanced at Damien, a flicker of worry passing over her features. “Damien, where did you send me? It was...wrong.”

“Did something happen?”

“No, but I couldn’t access my Ether. I couldn’t do anything. I felt...useless, I guess. And time clearly flows different there as well.”

“Better you not ask,” Damien said after a moment. “Honestly, it would be easiest for both of us if you forget all about it. I was a little angry when I sent you there the first time.”

Loretta nodded. “Okay. I’ll do that. Thank you both, I owe you my life. I won’t forget that. But, if you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with Nolan.”

“Don’t let us stop you,” Sylph said as they headed out of the alley. “Don’t be too harsh on him, though.”

Loretta gave them a weak smile. “I won’t be. Really, I just want to talk with him. That’s it.”

She hurried off toward the portal courtyard. Damien and Sylph watched her go, then turned and headed off themselves. They arrived at their room a short while later. Damien reached to push the door open, then paused. He groaned and rubbed his forehead.

“Could you tell me that I’m hallucinating?”

“I could. It wouldn’t make Delph not be inside our room,” Sylph grumbled, opening the door for him. Sure enough, Delph leaned against the back wall, chewing on a long reed with an annoyed expression.

“Seriously, you two need to stop with those senses. It’s completely ruining my fun,” Delph said, pushing himself off the wall as Damien and Sylph walked in.

“You could try not ambushing us for once,” Damien suggested. The professor had several bruises on his cheek and arms, which made him do a double take. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually seen Delph injured. “Wait, what happened to you?”

“You did,” Delph drawled. “Somebody didn’t see fit to tell me that a certain apprentice of mine was in town.”

Damien’s eyes widened. “Oh, crap! I completely forgot about that.”

“How do you forget that a woman like Kat is showing up?” Delph demanded. “If you forgot that, then you’ve got a serious memory problem that needs to be addressed before it causes you problems in a fight.”

“Not that,” Damien said, rolling his eyes. “I was hoping we’d be there when she found out where you were hiding. It probably would have been hilarious. Did she really do all that?”

Delph glowered at him. “She’s been hounding me for a fight for the past week. Unfortunately, I don’t have the energy to properly deal with her. There are too many Corrupted monsters to kill which, if I recall correctly, was kind of your job to deal with.”

“What happened to letting the professors take care of them so we could focus on our studies?” Sylph challenged.

“Bah. Don’t use my words against me,” Delph grumbled. He reached under his cloak and rustled around in it, pulling out two slips of paper. “It’s not often that someone pulls a fast one on me. I’ll get you for that.”

“Maybe you could just look at this as us getting you back for that godawful inn you made us stay at in Kingsfront,” Damien suggested.

“No chance.”

Delph flicked the papers at them. Damien and Sylph snatched them out of the air, but neither of them took their eyes off Delph to read them. He cracked a grin.

“Good to see some of what I’ve taught you stuck around.”

“More like it’s imprinted in my mind like a curse,” Damien said. “You’ve got good timing, though. Whisp said something about you planning a demonstration with us and the Corruption?”

“Ah,” Delph said, wrinkling his nose. “I lied to her. You recall how I transformed into that wendigo while you were training, right?”

“It’s been a bit, but yes,” Damien said, nodding.

“Well, I know what one of the Corruption Seeds looks like. Fought one for a bit. Thing was terrifyingly strong, but I’ve got a good handle on some of its abilities. Havel and I will mimic it and give the people a bit of a show.”

“How’s that even going to work?” Sylph asked. “Most of them will just see me and Damien as students, no matter how strong we are.”

“Oh, I count on it,” Delph said with a maniacal grin. “That’s why I’ll be putting my own little spin on things. Don’t you worry—nobody is going to leave thinking the Corruption isn’t a problem that has to be dealt with.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed, and he crossed his arms. “I don’t like the sound of the way you said that. What are you planning?”

“It won’t work if it’s not a surprise,” Delph replied. “Don’t worry, neither of you will be at any real risk unless you really suck when fighting me. I’ll be taking this pretty seriously, after all.”

“That’s not reassuring in the slightest,” Sylph said. “Can’t you just tell us exactly what you’re planning?”

“Hmm,” Delph said, rubbing his chin. “I suppose that would be the responsible thing to do, wouldn’t it?”

Damien and Sylph both nodded.

Delph’s body bent inward on itself, vanishing into a tiny point of gray before vanishing. Damien and Sylph both threw the area where he’d just been a rude gesture.

“I hate him,” Damien muttered, flopping onto his bed.

“Tell me about it,” Sylph said, doing the same and leaning against his chest. “Maybe if you make fun of him enough, he’ll come back to defend himself. He’s petty.”

“Not a bad idea,” Damien said, flipping the note over in his hand. “Let’s give that a shot. Delph is an insufferable idiot.”

“I’m pretty sure a literal monster would care more about its charges than he does,” Sylph added.

They kept at it for a few minutes. It didn’t work, but it felt great.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Their impromptu therapy session was interrupted by a knock on the door. Damien and Sylph both shot to their feet.

“I don’t detect anyone,” Damien said, his senses brushing over the area.

“Neither do I.” Sylph’s eyes narrowed, and a blade sprouted from her forearm.

They approached the door, and Damien opened it, his Ether at the ready. Staring back at them was Mark, looking more disheveled than ever.

His hair was long and ragged, and he sported several new scars on his neck and shoulders—many of which were only visible because his shirt was torn into shreds. He had a large, bone sword slung over his shoulder on a dark leather holster.

“Yo,” Mark said, raising a hand. “Kill anything interesting recently?”

“You’re...different,” Damien said, his guard lowering slightly. “I thought you were at Goldsilk. What happened?”

“Oh, I was,” Mark replied. “Whisp came and collected us a few days ago. I wasn’t really listening to what she was saying, though. Something about danger, but she’s always drunk. The biggest danger to her is the morning after.”

Damien snorted. “Fair enough. And nothing all that interesting, unfortunately. I did sneak into the princess’ room in Kingsfront, though.”

Mark grunted. “Why would I care about that? Unless there was something interesting to fight in it?”

“Unfortunately not,” Sylph said with a wry grin. “Just me and a few other students.”

“He fought you?”

“No, we just talked. We sparred later, though.”

“As I said,” Mark said, rolling his eyes. “Boring. Anyway, a whole bunch of people are at Blackmist, and Elania said we should probably get you. None of them would fight me until I played delivery boy, so here I am.”

“Which people?” Damien asked.

“Elania and some others.”

“We kind of already knew that.”

Mark just stared at him.

“Right. You forgot?”

“No. I just never bothered remembering.”

“Do you really just only remember people that are strong enough to fight?” Sylph asked, cocking her head to the side.

“No. Sometimes, I remember people that might eventually get strong enough to fight,” Mark replied. “Are you coming or not?”

“Sure,” Damien said. “We might as well. Where is everyone?”

“The visitor dorms that they were using for the Forsad trip,” Mark said, turning and drawing the blade from his shoulder. He brought it down in a powerful slash, and it cut a thin strip of red light through the air.

Mark grabbed the line with his other hand, pulling a portal open. He stepped into it, and it snapped shut behind him, vanishing.

“Good to see he hasn’t changed much, even if he’s gotten stronger. I’ve never met someone who could hide themselves from my senses like that, not to mention that new portal he’s using. Good for him. Why do you think everyone’s here?”

“No clue.” Sylph shrugged, allowing the blade to sink back into her arm. “Whisp is probably trying to angle for something. It’s probably easiest if we just ask them ourselves.”

Damien poked his head back into their room. “Hey, does anyone want to come with Sylph and me? It looks like a bunch of students are here for some reason.”

Venus and Xil emerged from their room after a few moments.

“Quinlan and Alina are practicing right now,” Xil said. “It’s probably best to not bother them. How did the whole thing with your friend and the Grays go?”

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Damien said, shaking his head. “Too many things happening at once. It went about as well as we could have hoped, I suppose.

Nobody we care about is dead.”

“Reassuring,” Venus drawled. “I’m still holding out for some of that training, Sylph. Will you have time later today?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Sylph said. “And given where we’re going, there will probably be a good number of sparring opportunities anyway.”

“If you think that’s a good idea, then I don’t mind. Where are we going?” Xil asked.

“The visitor dorms,” Venus said before Damien or Sylph could answer her.

They all glanced at her, and she shrugged.

“What? You were talking really loudly.”

“It’s not nice to eavesdrop,” Xil admonished.

“It’s fine, we really don’t care,” Damien said with a chuckle. “If we wanted to keep something quiet, I’d have Henry put up a sound barrier. Let’s get going before Mark shows back up, though. No point in keeping people waiting, and I have to admit that I’m a little curious as to what’s going on.”

The others nodded, and the four of them strode out of their room and down the mountain. They reached the visitor dorms a short while later. Unsurprisingly, the sounds of battle echoed out from within the pavilion as they walked into it.

A brilliant flash of light lit the room, and Viv sailed through the air. Henry took over Damien’s mage armor, extending a tendril and snagging the girl before she could slam into the wall. He brought her over to them, setting her on the ground.

“Thanks,” Viv said, wiping a trickle of blood from her nose. “Good to see you again, Damien. That’s some good reaction timing.”

“Send your compliments to the chef not the waiter,” Henry said, sliding out of Damien’s shadow in his blobby form.

“Nice to see you as well,” Damien said. “And that was my companion, can’t take credit for it.”

“Thank you, then,” Viv said, doing a great job of not looking surprised as she inclined her head in appreciation. “And nice to see you, too, Sylph. I don’t recognize your new friends.”

“Likewise,” Sylph said. “The girls are Xil and Venus. Damien picked them up from Mountain Hall, mostly on accident. They’re transferring here for a little while and staying in our room.”

Viv cocked an eyebrow. “In your room? If I recall correctly, the normal Blackmist housing is rather small, with just two beds per dorm.”

Xil’s face reddened, but Damien just laughed.

“I made them each separate rooms. It wasn’t too big of a deal.”

“Oh, you knew they were coming?”

“No. I just did it in a few minutes,” Damien replied with a frown.  
“Why?”

Viv stared at him for a few moments, then shook her head. “Never mind. It’s good to see you haven’t changed much.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Not that I mind seeing old friends again, but what brings you here?”

“My Dean sent me with Elania,” Viv replied. She glanced over her shoulder at the arena, where the dust was starting to settle. “We aren’t the only ones here, by the way. There are quite a few people.”

Aven emerged from the dust, Ether churning around her like an electric halo. It faded back into her body as she approached them, her face unreadable.

“I’m counting that as a loss,” Aven said.

“Naturally,” Viv replied, shaking some of the sand from her hair with a grimace. “You hit a lot harder than it looks like you should. What kind of Ether was that?”

“You’ll have to figure that out yourself,” Aven replied, a tiny flicker of a smile dancing over her face before she quenched it.

“Is this what Whisp has you doing?” Sylph asked. “Training transfer students?”

“More like entertaining myself,” Aven replied. “But something like that, yes. Not the job I thought I’d be doing after I graduated, but here I am.”

Damien scanned the rest of the pavilion. On the second floor, he quickly spotted Yui and Carson sitting at a table. Mark and Elania sat in the corner with a deck of cards between them. At the table behind them was Gaves and Bella, and Cheese leaned against the railing a few feet away from them.

“Is there a reason there are so many people here?” Sylph nodded up at the second floor. “And why do we know all of them?”

“Because not everybody has arrived yet,” Aven replied. “More are on the way.”

“For what, exactly?” Damien asked, but he was starting to get a suspicion he already knew the answer.

“The ranking battles,” Aven replied. “Or rather, after them.”

“I see,” Damien said. “Something big is going to happen, isn’t it? How many more people are coming?”

“I’m not at privilege to share that yet, but there are a fair number coming.”

“I couldn’t possibly imagine what she’s aiming for,” Damien said dryly.

*Henry, what do you think the chances are that Whisp is preparing some sort of excursion or army to attack the Corruption?*

“Oh, nearly one hundred percent,” Henry said in his mind. “Not bad choices, either, although I’m not sure about the princess. Sending her into a battlefield doesn’t seem like something the queen is going to like much. Not without a lot of protection.”

*Unless she’s here of her own volition, I get the feeling that the queen already knows what Whisp is doing. Gaves and Bella are hardly enough to fight off a horde of monsters, much less the Corruption, so I get the feeling her real guard isn’t showing themselves.*

“I could go hunting for them.”

*We both know it’s my dad. No point wasting time looking for him. I’m sure he’ll show up soon enough. It’s not like it makes much of a difference either way. Just keep an extra eye on Sylph to make sure he doesn’t try to get to her. I don’t trust him.*

“Already on it,” Henry promised.

“I see what you mean,” Aven said.

Damien blinked. “Huh? Sorry, what was that?”

“He does it sometimes,” Sylph said. “It’s not that you were completely uninteresting and just lost his attention.”

“Sylph, that just makes it sound like that *was* the case.”

“But it *wasn’t*.”

“I’m sure,” Aven said dryly. “I had asked if you’d come to spar with the rest of us. Whisp instructed me to determine where everyone stood in regard to one another.”

“For the event after the ranking battles?”

“Yes. Very astute.” Aven managed to sound completely sincere, but Damien just knew she was being sarcastic.

He rubbed the back of his head. Then, he shrugged. “Eh. I just came because Mark told me there were some people here. I just wanted to see

who it was. I've already been fighting a lot, so I don't really feel the need to spar right now."

"Perfect. I've been wanting to see— Wait, what? You *don't* want to spar?"

"Not particularly," Damien replied. He nodded up to the second floor. "I'm going up there. Nice seeing you again, though."

Aven stared at their group as they broke away and headed up to the second floor. Sylph nudged Damien in the side on the way.

"She was almost certainly the one who sent Mark after you. You think she's trying to find out how strong you are now?"

Damien inclined his head slightly. "Could be. I think my dad might be in the area, so let's avoid trusting anyone we don't know right now."

"I never trust people I don't know."

Yui raised a hand in greeting as they approached their table. Damien couldn't help but notice that Gaves and Bella were facing the wrong way—their backs were to the princess, and they were both hunched over their table, talking in hushed, excited tones.

He nearly missed a step on the way to Yui. *Bella* had emotion in her voice. He didn't think he'd ever heard her speak in anything other than a bored monotone.

"Damien, Sylph!" Yui said cheerfully. "I know it's only been a few days, but hello again. We decided to follow after you."

"More like we were told to," Carson said, scrunching his nose. "Can you believe I got an order as well? I've never heard a damn thing from the dean, but the moment I start dating Yui, a handwritten note shows up in my door voluntelling me to head over to Blackmist with her. Granted, I would have tried to go anyway, but seriously. I'm starting to feel like I was irrelevant before."

"You were," Yui said, patting him on the shoulder. "And you're probably going to wish that you were again pretty soon. I'm worth it, though."

"Depends how many times we get ordered around."

They both laughed, but Yui's face turned serious.

"I figure I should let both of you know—"

"My dad is here?" Damien guessed.

"Yes, actually," Yui said, blinking in surprise. "How'd you know?"

"Just a lucky guess. Is something happening?"

“Yeah, but I don’t know the specifics. Just that it’ll be after your ranking is all hashed out,” Yui said. “At first, I thought we were going to participate somehow, but that isn’t the case. We’re just going to be training up until whatever the event is. I couldn’t pry it out of anyone. But that aside, your friends—are they...”

Damien glanced over his shoulder at Venus and Xil.

“Ah, right. They’re students from Mountain Hall.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you—” Xil paused, searching for a name.

“Yui,” the princess finished.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Yui,” Xil said, inclining her head slightly. Venus’ eyes narrowed, and she studied the princess for a moment.

*They have absolutely no idea who she is, huh?*

“Venus looks like she might suspect something,” Henry said. “But yeah, Xil looks clueless.”

“They’re the ones I met at Mountain Hall when looking for Quinlan,” Damien added.

“Oh, I remember now!” Yui said, a grin crossing her face. “Xil is the one who tried to attack you?”

Xil reddened and glanced away. “I— Yeah. That was me.”

“Don’t worry,” Yui said. “Just about everyone has tried to fight Damien at least once. Not many of us have had much luck at it, though.”

Gaves cleared his throat loudly but didn’t turn around.

Elania and Mark paused their card game as more people started to gather around Yui’s table. She grinned as she spotted Damien and Sylph, waving energetically to them.

“It almost feels like the intermurals again,” Sylph said, giving Elania a polite nod. “Just with everybody we know.”

“You could make it feel even more like the intermurals by sparring with me,” Aven said, approaching from behind them.

Mark raised a hand, not moving from his table with Elania.

“No,” Aven said. “I’ve already sparred you six times today. I’m bored.”

“What about me?” Cheese asked.

“Absolutely not. You ruin my puppets every single time we fight.”

Cheese harrumphed and returned to staring down at the arena. Aven let out a heavy sigh.

“I’m dying of boredom here, Vale. You put up a pretty good fight against one of my puppets in the intermurals. Fight me.”

Damien and Sylph exchanged glances.

“Why him specifically?” Sylph asked.

“Because I’ve beaten everyone else in this room. I am completely and utterly bored,” Aven said, rubbing her forehead. “Whisp assigned me to you little brats, but Mark is the only one who actually wants to fight. I want some variety here.”

“Hey, I offered to fight,” Yui said, crossing her arms.

Aven scoffed. “Yeah, except fighting you is a death sentence. No thanks.”

“Why?” Xil asked, frowning. “Is she stronger than Damien or something?”

“Probably not,” Aven replied, “but I’m not trying to get executed by the queen.”

“The queen?” Xil’s eyes widened. “What does she have to do with any of this?”

“Moving on,” Yui said quickly before Aven could respond. “If Damien doesn’t want to fight you, what about Sylph?”

Aven studied Sylph. “Mostly because I’ve already fought Damien, and he beat my puppet. That kind of irks me. I want a rematch.”

*Do you think she’s playing at something?*

“No clue. You won’t let me look for your dad,” Henry replied with a grumble. “Does it matter? If we really try, there aren’t many mages that can pose a threat to us. Might as well have some fun.”

“I want a shot before Damien goes,” Sylph said, stepping forward. “If you fight him first, there might not be enough left of you for me to take on after.”

Aven’s eyes narrowed. “That’s bold. I know about how strong he is from Forsad, and that’s nowhere near enough to give me a real challenge.”

Sylph just cocked an eyebrow.

“What she says goes,” Damien said. “You want to fight me, let Sylph have fun first.”

Aven shrugged. “Fine. I was going to get around to her after you anyway, so swapping the order up doesn’t make a difference. Let’s get to it, then.”

## CHAPTER

# TWELVE

Sylph vaulted over the railing and landed gently on the sand below. Aven followed after her, dropping like a rock and thudding into the ground hard enough to knock a small cloud of it into the air around her.

“Planes,” Henry said, sliding out of Damien’s shadow. “How much does she weigh? Fatty.”

“Henry,” Yui admonished. “You say that to her face not behind her back. It’s rude if you spread rumors.”

“Oh, good idea,” Henry said. “Will do.”

Damien shook his head, his eyes fixed on the small arena below as Sylph and Aven moved to opposite ends of it and turned to face each other. He wasn’t the only one—everyone in the room was watching the brewing fight with rapt interest.

Mark and Elania had paused their game and had moved to the railing to peer down, and even Cheese was paying attention.

“On your mark,” Aven said, stretching her arms above her head. She raised her arms in a strange position over her head, turning her body into a Y shape. “You can make the first move.”

Sylph didn’t need to be told twice. She faded into her camouflage, disappearing from view. A small puff of sand from where she’d been standing was the only indication she had moved.

A loud *twang* rang out, and a tiny strand of light stretching across the arena behind Aven suddenly lit up. The sound repeated several times, revealing more of the strands crisscrossing over the sand.

Sylph faded back into view several paces away from Aven, her dagger pressed against one of the strands.

“Realized I could see you?” Aven asked, cocking her head to the side.

“No point wasting Ether when it isn’t going to change anything,” Sylph replied. She blurred, making for Aven once more. An instant before she reached the other woman, Sylph threw herself to the side.

Another strand had revealed itself, running just in front of where Sylph’s neck would have been. As Sylph slid to a stop, Damien realized a tiny cut had appeared on her neck. It sealed so quickly that it was hard to believe it had ever been there.

Sylph approached Aven again, slower this time. Aven stood still, content to just watch the younger woman try to reach her.

“What kind of magic even is that?” Elania asked. “Why isn’t Sylph just attacking her?”

“It looks like whatever those strings or strands are, they’re very sharp,” Damien said, not taking his eyes off the fight. “And it doesn’t look like Sylph can see where they are. If she moves too quickly or carelessly, she could lose a limb.”

“That sounds like it would take a ridiculous amount of Ether to keep up,” Yui said, narrowing her eyes. Sylph dashed at Aven again, slipping under several lines that appeared before her path.

An instant before she reached Aven, a thin blur whipped toward her, and she was forced to flicker to the side to avoid getting hit.

Damien extended his senses, brushing them over the arena. To his surprise, he couldn’t feel anything from most of the strands. A few had Ether running through them, but the rest were completely invisible.

“That isn’t magic,” Damien said. “The strands aren’t, at least. They’re real metal. Aven is putting Ether into them.”

“It’s her favorite way to fight,” Cheese supplied. “Vibration magic. It’s cheap and annoying. I hate fighting against it.”

*What do you think, Henry? Just destroy them with overwhelming force, right?*

“That’s usually going to be the case for you,” Henry answered in his mind. “We could probably cut through them with Tear or cut them off before they reached you with Devour. It would be easiest to use ranged attacks, though.”

*Sylph isn’t the best at those. It doesn’t look like she’s going all out yet either, though. She could just cut Aven off her magic.*

“Only if she understands enough about Vibration Ether to find it. Vibration is a pretty uncommon school, so it might be harder for Sylph to find in the middle of a fight. It looks like she’s trying to determine just how many strings Aven’s got set up around the arena.”

Metal squealed once more as Sylph’s dagger caught on another metal thread. Several other threads whipped toward her, but she vaulted out of the way, narrowly avoiding the attack.

“You aren’t doing bad,” Aven said. She still hadn’t moved from the spot where she’d started the fight. “For a Year Two, you’ve done far more than most. You can be proud of that.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Sylph replied. “I haven’t started yet.”

Aven laughed. “There’s no need to get a bruised ego. I’ve been doing this for far longer than you have.”

Sylph cocked her head to the side. Two scythes erupted from her back, arching over to loom above her. Green acid dripped from them, and she lowered her stance, keeping low to the ground.

Then Sylph vanished. Several of the strands slumped, falling harmlessly to the ground. A black shield bloomed around Aven, then shattered into shards as Sylph appeared, her scythes arcing toward the older student.

Aven flew backward as if she had been yanked, escaping a moment before either of Sylph’s weapons could reach her. She adjusted midair, slamming back down to the ground and making a sharp motion with her hands.

All over the arena, threads materialized like the web of a spider. Every single one of them wound back to Aven, connecting to every part of her body.

“She actually managed to cut through Aven’s Ether-enforced strings,” Cheese said, letting out a slow whistle. “Now that’s cool. She wasn’t that strong back in Forsad.”

He turned to Damien and nudged him.

“What?”

“Her name. What is it again?”

“Sylph. Why?”

“Just curious. It wasn’t worth remembering before,” Cheese said, turning back to the fight. “At least, I don’t think it was. I don’t remember.”

“You’re fast,” Aven said, no longer looking nearly as calm as she had been before. Now, her face was determined and her eyes sharp, watching

Sylph like a hawk. “What kind of magic are you using?”

“None, yet,” Sylph replied. “That shield was Dark magic, though.”

“One of my many talents,” Aven replied, curling a finger. Threads snapped toward Sylph, and she vanished. The moving threads flopped to the ground, cut into shreds. Sylph blurred toward Aven, carving through everything in her path.

Aven raised her hands, then blinked in surprise. Damien suppressed a laugh. He recognized the look on her face—she’d just tried to use her Dark magic and found out that it was completely cut off from her.

To her credit, Aven reacted with incredible speed. Jagged ice erupted from the ground beneath her like a flower, jutting out in every direction and forcing Sylph to vault backward to avoid getting impaled.

“What is this?” Aven asked. “What did you do?”

Sylph didn’t respond. White energy enveloped her as her companion joined the fight, encasing Sylph in translucent armor. Then, she charged at Aven once more.

Ether filled the arena as the two girls threw themselves into a violent fight. Metal rang out and energy scored across the sand, melting and throwing it into the air.

Aven’s mastery of magic was unbelievable. As they danced through the arena exchanging blows, she drew upon Fire, Earth, and Light magic. Each one was chosen at the precise time to give her the best chance of injuring Sylph, as Aven had realized that she only had one shot with every type before Sylph sealed it away.

Everyone watched in rapt attention as the battle raged. It was difficult to tell which of them had the lead. If Sylph had been able to shut out Aven’s Vibration magic, she would have won long ago. But since it appeared that she couldn’t, Aven was holding her own.

Even though threads littered the ground, dozens of them still stretched through the air. With every twitch of Aven’s fingers, they shifted through the arena, each one threatening to carve Sylph apart.

After twisting out of the way of an attack that nearly took a leg off, Sylph adjusted her stance once more. Her eyes narrowed, and she blurred toward Aven. Threads snapped to cut off her path and constricted around her like a ball, leaving only a single opening to Sylph’s right. A grin stretched across Aven’s face, and she thrust a hand into the air.

Jagged spikes of metal erupted from the ground in the opening, where they would impale Sylph if she had dodged into it. It was the only logical move, as every other one would have resulted in getting cut to pieces by the razor wires.

Sylph didn't do the logical move. She leapt forward, extending her body and retracting her scythes into her back. Aven's eyes went wide as Sylph passed through a tiny hole between the threads—but not completely.

One of the threads hit her on the elbow, carving her arm off just below it. Sylph rolled as she hit the ground, rising back to her feet. She extended the stump of her arm toward her severed hand and strands of green acid leapt out, connecting to it and yanking the limb back.

It squelched back into place, and Sylph's forearm morphed into a blade. She brought it up with blinding speed, resting it against Aven's neck. The arena was silent. Everyone stared at them in awe, Damien included. It had been one of the most impressive fights he'd seen in a while.

Even though he knew about Sylph's incredible regenerative abilities, a flash of fear had struck him when he saw Sylph's arm get severed. He hadn't realized she'd managed to stretch them this far. This was even more than the normal Corrupted monsters could do.

"That was incredible," Aven breathed, lowering her hands and letting the remaining threads go slack. "I've never seen anything like it. How many kinds of lost magic do you have? That wasn't healing that you used, was it?"

Sylph lowered her arm, letting it return to its normal shape. "It was not. You're very good yourself. I didn't think I'd need to try so hard against another student."

"Another student?" Aven snorted. "I'm not a student anymore, and I don't want to pat myself on the back, but I'm one of the strongest mages out of Blackmist in a while. How did you get this much stronger since Forsad?"

"I had good motivation," Sylph replied with a smirk. "But you didn't fight like this at Forsad either."

Aven flicked her hands. The slack threads whistled through the air, retracting through the sleeves of her shirt.

"That's because I wasn't technically there. I was controlling a doll. That's typically how I fight, but it means I can't use my Vibration magic as I'm already using it to move the doll around. I never expected I would have needed to use my full strength there."

“Did you use it here?” Sylph asked.

Aven grimaced. “No. I’m not allowed to right now, but I think you might have gotten me even if I had used it. I didn’t expect you to be as strong as you were. We’re going to have a very long talk later, if you don’t mind. There’s a lot I’d like to learn from you.”

“Her attitude sure changed,” Henry said.

*I’m not so sure. I’m pretty sure she was trying to get Sylph and I to fight her by being a little rude. I think this is more like her real attitude. It’s closer to how she acted at Forsad anyway.*

“She keeps getting stronger,” Mark muttered, staring down at Sylph. His eyes raised to Damien’s, and he squinted. “You, too?”

Damien nodded. “We’re an even match if our companions don’t get involved.”

“And if they do?” Mark asked.

“Then, we win,” Henry said with a smug grin. “No contest, I’m afraid. I’m just too talented. And handsome.”

Mark grunted. “I’m not ready to fight you seriously yet. I have to train harder.”

Elania groaned. “Oh, no. He just left isolated training a few days ago. Damien, tell him to train with other people instead of shutting himself up.”

“Train with other people instead of shutting yourself up.”

Aven looked up at them. “Good topic transition. Thank you. Training is the reason I’m here—and the reason you are, too.”

“You said Whisp assigned you,” Mark said. “Could you explain exactly what’s going on?”

Aven nodded. She leapt into the air, grabbing onto a thin thread and swinging herself onto the platform beside them. Sylph appeared beside her.

“I’ve been hired to make sure you’re all as strong as possible. Over the next few weeks, I’ll be helping with all of your training sessions. That’s why you’ve all been brought here.”

“Whisp assigned you for this?” Damien asked suspiciously.

“Well, technically, Whisp assigned me to someone else who assigned me here,” Aven replied, leaning against the railing. “But it’s the same thing.”

“Is there something in particular we’re training for?” Viv asked.

Damien’s eyes narrowed. Aven’s avoidance of saying exactly who had hired her had done the exact opposite and told him exactly who was

responsible. Before he could say anything, a mote of gray light bloomed behind them, and Delph emerged from within it. A red portal snapped open beside him, and Dredd stepped out as well, a weary expression on his face.

“Well done, Aven. I love a dramatic entrance,” Delph said. “Hello again, you little brats. As Aven said, we’ll be responsible for giving you the most rapid training possible over the next few weeks. See, after Blackmist’s ranking battles, we’re all going on a fieldtrip to the frontlines.”

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# CHAPTER

# THIRTEEN

Everyone stared at Delph. He cocked his head to the side.

“What? Why are you all looking at me like that? I expected some excitement. Maybe a little cheering.”

“I told you this would happen,” Aven said, flopping down in a chair and leaning back to balance on its hind legs. “Seriously, what student wants to go to that hellscape?”

“Why, exactly, are we going to the frontlines?” Viv asked carefully. “And was this run past Goldsilk’s Dean? I find it hard to believe that—”

“All approved,” Delph said, raising a hand. “Sorry, kids. You got sold out. All of you. No getting out of this.”

“Even me?” Yui asked, but she sounded far more excited than worried.

*I guess she’s happy for a chance to actually be able to do something without the queen interfering. Can’t blame her.*

“Even you,” Delph said. “Rather, the queen didn’t figure out that I slipped that line into the contract I gave her. Anyone who gets us to give them our full attention for a few weeks is going to be either formidable or dead by the end of it.”

“With the schedule you seem to want to keep, dead seems more likely,” Dredd said, leaning on his staff with a grimace. “I’ll mention that, if you want, any of you can drop out of this at any time. Your failure will be reported to your respective deans, and you will be sent back to your school—but at least you won’t be dead.”

“You never answered Viv’s question,” Damien pointed out, leaning against the railing. At this point, he wasn’t even all that surprised. Delph was more than slightly insane, but he didn’t do things like this for no

reason. That meant the best course of action was determining *why* Delph wanted to go to the frontlines. “I welcome the training, but what do the frontlines have to do with this?”

“The Corruption has been cropping up more along the frontlines than anywhere else,” Dredd reported. “Delph is under the belief that at least one of the Corruption Seeds is there. Second may be as well. Either way, by bringing the fight to them, we hope to do enough damage to stall whatever the Corruption is planning.”

“And your elite team of choice is a bunch of students?” Venus asked, cocking an eyebrow. “Is this a joke?”

“Nope. All the actually useful mages were already on the frontlines,” Delph replied. “And none of them want to work with me. Can’t imagine why. Regardless, I need a group that will actually listen to my orders.”

“And everyone here is involved?” Mark asked.

“With the addition of Quinlan, who has already been brought up to speed and is currently training,” Dredd said. “There will be several instructors involved in this effort. Delph and I will be taking the lead, and there will be several others involved as well. I am not at liberty to say who all of them are.”

“Well, I’m in,” Mark said. “Any chance to get stronger is one I’ll take—so long as this is more effective than my normal training. Will it be?”

“Trust me,” Delph said with a smirk. “Anyone that has my undivided attention is going to grow at a *very* significant pace.”

“Anyone?” Damien asked.

“Yes, Damien. Even you and Sylph. Or do you think you’ve already surpassed me?”

“I’m more debating on if I trust you,” Damien replied.

Delph grimaced. “The incident you’re thinking of is technically Havel’s fault not mine.”

“What did he do?” Mark asked, glancing from Delph to Damien curiously.

“Never mind,” Damien said, shaking his head. “I was going to be training anyway, so this can’t hurt. I’m only staying if it’s genuinely helpful, though. And I’m not making any promises about whatever you’re planning with the trip to the frontlines, Delph. You aren’t getting that trust back so easily.”

Delph grunted. “Fair enough. I assume Sylph is in the same boat?”

“Always,” Sylph replied. “What kind of training are you planning on doing? This isn’t Year One anymore. We’ve all got our own styles of fighting, and not everything is going to be useful for everyone.”

“We’ve taken that into account,” Dredd said. “That’s why there will be multiple teachers involved in this. Our goals for the next few weeks are to hone what you’re good at to the absolute max that we can achieve, not to make you well-rounded mages.”

“Seems reasonable enough,” Elania said. “And...not that I’m complaining, but isn’t there a bit of a power disparity here? We all just saw the fight between Sylph and Aven. I don’t know about everyone else, but that’s leagues beyond me. Why did you choose me?”

“Me as well,” Xil said. “I’ve barely just achieved my core evolution. Aren’t I just going to be dead weight?”

“You might not get to Damien or Sylph’s level in the time we’ve got, but Dredd and I have some ways to accelerate your advancement,” Delph said. “You were chosen because you all already know each other, and at least one of the instructing mages believes you have potential. That’s all we need.”

“So, when do we start?” Gaves asked, finally rising from his spot beside Bella.

“Now,” Delph replied. “Unless anyone has anything they need to take care of today first.”

He paused for a moment, but nobody spoke up. The students who knew Delph more were all watching him with anything between mild suspicion and open distrust, while the others were mostly just curious.

“Fantastic,” Delph said. “To start this, you’re going to need to determine exactly how you want to fight. Some of you already know this, and others might have absolutely no idea. For example, Sylph relies on speed and close range to overwhelm her opponents. Aven, on the other hand, prefers to keep her foes at a range and cut them down before they can reach her. Whatever it may be, determining this will let us make sure you’re paired up with a teacher who can help you the most.”

“I’m close range,” Mark said promptly. “Physical combat is what interests me the most.”

“What if our powers lend themselves more toward support than fighting?” Viv asked. “I can hold my own fairly well, but my biggest talents are gathering information.”

“We’ve got someone who can help there, too,” Delph said. “She’ll be in tomorrow. All of you, separate yourselves into groups of roughly matching styles.”

The students milled about, but most of them had already been fighting for long enough to have a very good understanding of where they preferred to be. Within a minute, several groups had formed.

Damien, Yui, and Elania were the fighters that preferred to be at a range. Beside them, the largest group of mostly close ranged fighters, consisted of Sylph, Mark, Venus, Xil, Carson, and Gaves.

Bella and Viv stood off to the side in what Delph had dubbed the support section. Cheese had joined Aven and the other instructors across from them, even though he was still a student as far as Damien was aware.

“Quinlan will also be with the supports, even though her powers don’t line up with the others,” Delph said once they had finished arranging themselves. “Now, many of you are already aware of each other’s abilities. But, for those of you who aren’t, we should briefly go everyone’s strengths and weaknesses.”

“You want us to disclose information like this to students of a rival school?” Venus asked. “That doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

Delph’s eyes narrowed. “This isn’t about schools anymore. The Corruption is a threat to the Mortal Plane. Mages on the frontlines are struggling against the incredible numbers of them showing up, and the Corruption has swept through the kingdom, attacking villages and cities. Do you think it’s asking what school anyone is from before it kills them?”

Venus lowered her gaze. “No.”

“Then, schools don’t matter anymore. What does matter is keeping yourself and your team alive, and the only way you can do that is if you perfectly understand what everyone can and cannot do. Start sharing.”

Damien couldn’t disagree with Delph, but he was pretty sure his biggest weakness was going to be if people found out exactly what Henry was. That wasn’t something he was about to share around more than he had to, so he elected to focus on his inability to utilize his full strength for a long period of time.

He avoided specifically mentioning the Void, instead saying he simply couldn’t handle Henry’s full strength for long periods of time. It wasn’t the best explanation, but it was more than enough for their purposes.

Since Damien already knew many of the other students fairly well, he'd already knew the general weaknesses they had. In his own team, Elania just didn't have much Ether to work with and needed to train more, and Yui was sheltered and lacked real world experience.

Delph and Dredd had all the teams speak with each other, not just amongst themselves. Soon enough, everyone was thoroughly uncomfortable by having their biggest problems displayed and discussed.

"Now we've got a very general understanding of each other," Delph said. "You'll need to really fight together in order to see how those weaknesses come into play in a fight, but this is a starting point. Before we move to the actual exercise, there's one more question I have to assess how good you are at reading a situation."

He waited for a few moments as everyone stopped talking and turned toward him. Delph beckoned to the other teachers.

"Let's say Dredd and I are both somehow incapacitated. Maybe we're fighting a monster strong enough to keep our full attention. Hey, you might all get lucky, and we could be dead. Either way, we're out of the picture. Who among the people in this room is the strongest?"

Sylph immediately pointed at Damien, while everyone else glanced amongst each other. Xil slowly pointed at Damien as well, with Mark following shortly after. Elania pointed at Mark, and Graves, Carson, and Bella both pointed at Yui—who turned to Sylph. Viv's finger landed on Aven, and Venus just didn't bother answering.

Cheese looked mildly offended at the entire thing and pointed at himself, and Aven just shook her head in annoyance.

Delph snorted. "Poor judgment. Well, we'll see how your answers change soon enough."

"I'm not sure that question is appropriate," Sylph said, letting her hand drop. "In the middle of a battle, the strongest person isn't the one we should be looking to. It should be the one who has the best understanding of how the fight is going. Realistically, our strongest fighter is going to be doing their job and fighting."

"Good point," Delph said, inclining his head. "This was just to see how many of you were able to spot danger when it's standing beside you. Right, then—time to get started for real. I'll be taking all the close range combatants."

Havel rippled on Delph's shoulders, and the grizzled mage snapped his fingers, opening a gray portal to his side. Delph nodded to it.

“In you go.”

“Ranged fighters with me.” Dredd tapped his staff on the ground, and a red portal bloomed before him. He stepped into it without waiting for anyone to respond.

“And support can stay here,” Cheese said, covering a yawn. “Your instructor should be here pretty soon. She’s just running late.”

Damien nodded to Sylph, and an unspoken conversation passed between them. Their guards would be up.

Everyone that was leaving piled into their portals, following after the teachers to wherever they were taking them.

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# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Damien's palm burned as he emerged from the swirling Ether and stepped into a large forest clearing larger than Blackmist's arena. Stumps littered the ground around them, and the ground was scarred from where trees had been torn from their roots.

Several trees emerged from the ground like the spears of giants, their jagged stumps pointed toward the heavens. Damien only took an instant to study it—the burning in his palm was as strong as it had ever been, and there was only one thing that could cause that.

The Corruption was near.

Magic surged to Damien's hands, and he drew energy from the lines of Ether surrounding them, filling his core as he swept their surroundings in search of the source of Herald's warning.

“Guards up,” Damien barked as the Yui and Elania emerged behind him. “The Corruption is here.”

Yui's eyes widened in surprise, and Elania spun in a circle, raising her hands defensively. They both glanced around, then turned back to Damien with confused expressions.

“Where?” Yui asked.

The air beside her crackled, and Dredd arrived, striding out to stand before them.

“Sealed,” Dredd said, tapping his staff on the ground.

“Where? Why?”

“For training. What better to train against than the very enemy we seek to defeat? Don't worry. This was a joint project between several very powerful mages, me included. The Corruption cannot break out.”

“That doesn’t seem very convincing,” Damien said, not letting his guard down in the slightest. “Are you sure?”

“Completely confident,” Dredd replied. “I am not my brother. There are no risks of the Corruption escaping alive. That does not guarantee your safety while fighting it, but there will be no surprises from it.”

Damien let his hands lower, but he didn’t release his hold on the Ether. He just inclined his head slightly. “Fine. One more question—how’d you hear Yui’s question? You hadn’t come through your portal yet.”

“I possess the ability to hear and see the area my portals open in before I pass through them,” Dredd replied. “I had wanted to determine the extent of everyone’s ability in gauging the threat. Of course, I was already aware of yours, but I wished to see if Yui or Elania were capable of the same.”

Damien grunted and gestured for Dredd to continue. The professor gestured to the ruined clearing around them.

“Yui, Elania, now that Damien has alerted you to the presence of the Corruption in the area, I’d like you to try to determine where it is. Do not move from this spot during the duration of your search, and it is not farther than the borders of this clearing.”

“How long do we have?” Yui glanced over her shoulder, as if the Corruption were just sitting behind her back. “And I trust we can use Ether?”

“Until I say your time is up,” Dredd replied. “And, of course, what would the point of this be if you couldn’t? You may use any tool at your disposal. If you are able to locate it, inform me. Do not attempt to attack or otherwise interact with it.”

While they spoke, Damien had already cast his senses out. Even though Dredd had told him not to participate, he had no desire to wait around idly while a Corrupted monster was in the area. At the bare minimum, he needed to know where it was.

His mental energy brushed across the clearing as he cast them out like a net, dragging it through the clearing. Within a few seconds, his energy made contact with a large form crouching near the edge of the tree line, surrounded by several large, splintered trunks.

Damien studied it for a moment, discretely moving his palm to point in its direction. The pain grew stronger, then blinked out. That was the equivalent of a resounding cheer of approval from Herald, so he pulled most of his energy back, keeping a single strand attached to the creature.

Satisfied, he snuck a glance at Yui and Elania to see how they were doing. The princess was scanning the field with squinted eyes. She passed over the hidden Corruption nearly a dozen times, and Damien was pretty sure she was going to get dizzy if she spun any further.

Elania had a significantly better system. Panels of golden light shimmered before her, and an orb hovered far in the sky above them. He didn't recognize the magic she used, but Henry filled the gaps in for him.

"She's bending the light entering the globe in the air and sending it down to the screens in front of her," Henry said in his mind. "They're shielded to stop you from seeing what's going on, though the shields aren't very strong. Either way, it isn't going to work as she's currently doing it. The Corruption isn't camouflaged. It's invisible, so her light isn't going to pick anything up."

Elania had evidently come to the same conclusion. She pursed her lips, then pressed her hands to the plates. Ether gathered around her, seeping into her spell from her palms. Beams of golden energy swept across the arena. Damien instinctively cast Devour above himself, blocking the spell from touching him, but Elania was too focused on her work to care. The beams of light struck the ground and bounced back into the orb in the air.

*That's interesting. Was she checking how the Ether reacted to what it touched? I like that idea. Not as fast as just sweeping with mental energy, though.*

"Not everyone has the ridiculous amount of mental energy that you do," Henry said. "That was cleverly done. For a human, that is."

"I think I found it," Elania said, lowering her hands and dismissing her Ether with a grin.

"Very well," Dredd said. "Yui?"

Yui chewed her lower lip, then shook her head. "I don't know. I could probably throw Ether around until I hit something but, in any real situation, that would be useless. It would either move out of the way or I'd end up damaging something I don't want to."

"I see. Elania, please point to the Corruption," Dredd said.

Elania pointed in the direction of the monster. Yui followed her finger, then let out a sigh when she saw nothing but air.

"Very good," Dredd said. "That is correct. Yui, consider why you were unable to do this task. What are your shortcomings?"

Yui's gaze fell, and her cheeks reddened in shame. "It's because I've always got someone to do that for me. All I've really trained to do is fight, and mostly against people who are worried about hurting me."

Dredd grunted. "Yes, I'm aware. But there was a way to locate this monster without using your Ether."

"What? How?"

"By watching where he was looking," Dredd said, nodding to Damien. "Despite me telling him not to bother, Damien immediately located the Corrupted monster and has been staring at it ever since."

Damien cleared his throat as Yui followed his gaze, realizing that he was also looking in the direction Elania had indicated. The princess scrunched her nose in annoyance.

"Oh. I didn't think of that."

"That is because you lack experience," Dredd said. "We will rectify that. I do not have the time or patience to teach you a spell that will let you detect the Corruption. You will either figure one out for yourself or determine a way to locate it with more mundane means. If you can do neither, you are a liability."

Dredd tapped his staff against the ground. A ring of red energy rippled outward, washing past all of them and spreading through the clearing. As it washed over the invisible Corrupted monster, motes of energy stuck to it, remaining behind as the ring continued outward.

The energy grew brighter as it covered the monster's entire body, then faded away and took the invisibility with it. What remained was a large, hunched giant made of cracked gray stone. Green acid glimmered in the cracks between its body, and it was hunched over and squatting, its face toward the ground.

Thick black chains covered with glowing red runes were connected to its arms and legs, and a heavy collar rested around its neck. The runes covering the collar were so numerous that they looked like lines rather than individual drawings.

"This Corrupted monster has already been weakened, but it was a formidable opponent," Dredd said, walking toward it and gesturing for them to follow him.

"Why is it just sitting there? How did you capture it?" Elania asked, her eyes wide in a mixture of wonder and fear.

“Delph severed its connection to the Ether, then tore it apart until it was unable to regenerate,” Dredd replied, coming to a stop a healthy distance away from the creature. “We then bound it in restrictive runes, carving them into its body as it regenerated. The chains are an extra precaution but are unlikely to be necessary.”

Damien’s eyes widened. “That must have taken a ridiculous amount of time.”

“Approximately one week per monster,” Dredd replied, his tone unchanging. “It was for an important task, and we did not think it wise to just send you out against the Corruption, hunting it without any precautions whatsoever.”

Damien let out a bark of laughter, and the girls glanced at him. Dredd’s mouth quirked upward for a fraction of a second in what might have been a smile, but it was gone so quickly that nobody would have been able to say if it actually happened.

“If I recall correctly, it was your choice to hunt the Corruption,” Dredd said. “We didn’t interfere with that. Our mistake was...elsewhere.”

“Mistake?” Elania asked.

“Between us, I am afraid,” Dredd replied curtly. “Regardless, this is what we will be training against for the time being. There will be two parts to this special training. The first will be with just me, where we will refine your individual abilities. The second will be as a group with the others, where we work on teamwork. Most of our time will be spent in the latter exercise. Do you have any questions?”

“Yeah. Are you sure you’re related to Delph?” Damien asked. “Because he probably would have just set the monster free and told us to survive while shouting suggestions from the sidelines.”

“I believe that is his lesson plan for the close range fighters,” Dredd said.

Yui laughed but trailed off quickly when she realized that the professor was straight-faced. “Wait, seriously?”

“I do not joke.”

“I am so glad we went with you,” Elania muttered. “I bet Mark is having the time of his life, though.”

Dredd grunted, unimpressed. “I am pleased to be of service. Now, since we do not appear to have any further questions, we will begin—starting with the weakest of you.”

Elania took a step forward, only to find Dredd's staff placed against her chest. He pushed her back, then tapped Yui on the shoulder and jerked his chin toward the Corrupted monster. Yui's eyebrows rose.

“Me? I’m the weakest?”

“Yes. You lack experience. Both Damien and Elania have been in numerous real fights—I can see it in their stances and the way they hold themselves. Your mother has done you no favors by assigning guards to protect you. You are unprepared for this threat. I will prepare you.”

Yui flinched. Her hands clenched at her sides, and she nodded. “But my magic—”

Dredd cocked his head to the side, and Yui snapped her mouth shut. They stared at each other for a few moments. Then, the princess inclined her head.

“Okay. What are we doing?”

“Survival training. To begin with, we will focus on self-preservation. Your job is to avoid being struck by any abilities or spells for the next five minutes. You may not leave this clearing or interact with the Corruption or other students. For the duration of this particular task, you may use any tool or ability at your disposal,” Dredd replied, cracking his neck. “Elania, Damien, I would request your assistance.”

“Sure,” Elania said. “What do you need?”

“If it looks like I am about to go too far, please stop me,” Dredd replied, tossing his staff to the side. Instead of falling to the ground, it floated back through the air until it came to a stop several feet away from them. “I have always struggled to hold back.”

Bands of red light wrapped around Dredd’s hands, stretching out like rubber as he wound them around his knuckles. He flexed his fingers, then nodded.

“Prepare yourself, Princess. Our time starts now.”

“I’m read—”

Dredd yanked a hand back. The bands stretched through the air, expanding and entangling Yui’s right arm. She stumbled, pulled off balance. Dredd took a swift step forward, then drove his other fist into her stomach with enough force to make both Damien and Elania wince.

The bands holding Yui snapped, and she tumbled across the ground, slamming into an upended tree with enough force to snap it in half. She

rolled out of the side an instant before it crashed to the ground where she had fallen.

Yui staggered upright, clutching her stomach. Delph wrapped the bands of light around his hand once more, drawing more of the strange magic out from the air around them. Then, he flicked his hand toward her.

They extended like hungry tentacles, whipping toward Yui. She threw her hands upward, and a flower of ice bloomed around her, knocking Dredd's magic to the side harmlessly. The professor approached the flower and rested a hand against it.

"You intend to maintain this for the duration of our fight?" Dredd guessed. "A viable strategy, if you are strong enough to keep it intact. However, it does immobilize you. That is a glaring weakness."

He wound the bands of light around his hand once more, drawing the red energy out from the air and constricting it around Yui's ice flower. Dredd pulled, and the flower groaned in protest, ice creaking as it tried to keep the foreign Ether from cutting through it.

For an instant, Damien thought Yui's defenses might have held. Then, with a final scream of protest, the ice shattered. The princess' eyes went wide as the strands carved clean through her magic, shearing it to pieces as it wound toward her.

Fire erupted around Yui, swallowing the ice flower and Dredd whole. Heat washed over Damien and a massive explosion rocked the clearing, charring trees and sending them tumbling across the ground.

Elania was nearly thrown off her feet, but Henry caught her with a cloak-tendril and yanked her back to the ground.

When the flame fell, Yui stood behind Dredd, holding a flaming sword before her. She'd tried to cut the professor's back, but he'd blocked the blow with a single string of red light behind him.

*Doesn't that magic kind of look like Aven's?*

"I don't think we've even scratched what his magic can do, but that's almost certainly the same technique," Henry confirmed. "Just... considerably better. His strings are pure Ether, while hers were metal. I suppose that would make them worse against Sylph, but against everyone else, that's a big difference."

"Offense is a valid strategy, Yui," Dredd said, not even bothering to turn around. "But it only works if your attacks are strong enough to keep your opponent from retaliating."

A red string wrapped around Yui's leg and yanked her into the air, turning her upside down. She pulled herself up, slashing the strand with her sword. It held for a moment, then snapped with a *twang*.

As Yui fell, fire gathered around her body. She slammed into the ground like a meteor, then charged Dredd.

"You are supposed to be acting as a ranged fighter. Do not put yourself in a position where you can be injured," Dredd said. He flicked his fingers and a bolt of red light shot out, catching Yui in the chest. Her flame winked out and she was thrown back for the second time.

She managed to get her feet out beneath her and skidded across the dirt, coming to a stop just before several trees. Yui's sword winked out, and she leaned against one of the trees behind her, breathing heavily.

"You might find your Ether is depleting abnormally fast," Dredd said. "The Corruption can drain the Ether from your surroundings. You will have to learn to conserve the energy you have stored within your core efficiently."

"Why didn't you tell me that earlier?" Yui asked.

"A lesson learned through action is always far more effective than words," Dredd replied. "Come, now. We still have a little more than four minutes left."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dredd put those four minutes to very good use. As it turned out, his teaching wasn't anything like Delph's—it was better. He was like the refined, calculating version of the other professor.

Instead of insane training regimens or pushing students to the limit until they could do nothing but improve, Dredd's strategy was refined. He pressed Yui, forcing her to fight him at a distance and intensifying the strength of his attacks whenever she let him grow close.

Every time one of his attacks connected with her, Dredd repeated the move until Yui discovered a way to block or avoid it. More often than not, that resulted with him pummeling her into a tree half a dozen times. But, despite the brutality, it was effective.

By the time their fight had ended, Yui hadn't managed to land a single successful attack on Dredd, but she'd managed to protect herself from three of his attacks. As soon as the time ran out, she flopped to the ground, covered in bruises and gasping for air.

"Acceptable performance," Dredd said. "I suggest you practice in any manner that you can before our next session. It will not be so easy."

"Easy?" Yui asked, wheezing. She squinted up at him through a swollen eye. "When's the next one?"

"Who knows. I suggest you improve quickly," Dredd replied, baring his teeth in a thin smile. "And remember, you are a ranged fighter. Act like one. If you keep letting me get so close to you, this will go very poorly."

The professor turned his gaze to Elania, who swallowed nervously.

"Me next?"

“You next,” Dredd agreed, beckoning her forward. “Five minutes. Same rules.”

“My abilities are a little more focused on scouting,” Elania said hesitantly. “I don’t think—”

She thrust her hands forward mid-sentence, sending a barrage of golden bolts hurtling toward Dredd. The professor stepped back into a red portal as it opened up behind him, vanishing before the spell could catch him.

He emerged behind Elania as golden armor bloomed over her body. She spun, a shield shimmering to life between her and Dredd as a red strand carved into it with a loud *screech*. The shield split apart, but Elania had already dodged back, weaving between the trees and hurling blasts of golden light back at Dredd to try and keep him back.

Dredd darted after her, strands of red light materializing in the air all around him as he started to weave a web of energy around Elania. She continued to run, throwing bolts of energy behind her without looking back.

To Damien’s surprise, though, the attacks were all on target. Dredd was forced to dodge and defend against all of them, which slowed his movement considerably. Damien glanced up at the orb glimmering above the clearing.

*She’s using it to figure out where he is and throw attacks at him without having to turn around. That’s actually pretty impressive. Mark has been training her well.*

“It’s too bad her attacks aren’t stronger,” Henry said. “Dredd is only defending against them to give her practice. He could probably just ignore them completely. We’ve seen her throw stronger spells in the intermural tournament, though. I suspect she’s just trying to get an exact lock on his movements before she really starts fighting.”

Damien had to agree. The tiny bolts of energy Elania flung probably wouldn’t have done much more than sting with the amount of Ether she was putting into them. It was certainly a clever tactic, especially since Dredd was limiting the amount of Ether they could use during the fight.

*Actually, how is Dredd even limiting the Ether we’re drawing? That’s an ability unique to the Corruption.*

“Not if he’s enveloping the girls with his mental energy completely. I think he’s just crushing their energy to keep them from drawing any Ether. It won’t work on us,” Henry said mentally.

A loud *crack* split the air as Elania fired a huge blast of golden Ether into the air. It soared into the sky, vanishing through the clouds. They all

looked up at the spell as it descended like a bolt of lightning, crashing down directly on top of Dredd.

The impact shook the ground and splintered several tree stumps near the professor, tearing them to shreds and tossing their dust into the air. A red thread sliced through the air just as a victorious expression started to pass over Elania's face, catching her by the throat but failing to fully cut through her glowing defenses.

Dredd burst from the cloud of debris, appearing before her and driving a powerful kick into her stomach.

Elania's eyes bulged and her armor shattered, allowing the thread to snap around her neck. She grabbed it, and her hands flared with light, barely managing to rip it free before Dredd kicked her in the stomach again, sending her rolling across the ground.

She'd learned her lesson from watching Yui's fight and staggered to her feet, forming a shield as Dredd pressed the attack. Elania's shield didn't last long, and she went down quickly. Dredd only waited long enough for her to rise to her feet before he attacked again.

By the time five minutes had passed, Elania didn't look much better than Yui. She'd put up a better fight and had actually managed to land a few blows on Dredd, but none of them, even the huge blast of Ether, had done more than slightly singe him.

Nursing her bruises, Elania dragged herself over to Yui and flopped to the ground with a groan, leaning against the other girl. Yui stiffened at a moment, probably unused to much contact with random people she barely knew, but she was too tired to react much further.

"You're next," Dredd said, turning to Damien and extending his arm. His staff flew through the air and slapped into his palm. "I'll need this for you."

"How hard am I meant to be trying?" Damien asked. He nodded at Elania and Yui. "Do you and Delph plan to involve them in everything? Because, if you do, they're going to see Henry fight sooner or later."

Dredd shrugged. "In the end, it's up to you. It's your companion. Make the decision yourself. Do you trust them?"

*I don't really know Elania all that well, but she never said anything about Sylph and I technically causing Drew and Bartholomew's deaths. What do you think?*

“It’s not like we’ll tell them anything specific,” Henry said. “I doubt either of them even know what the Void is. And, if we really need to, it’s not like I can’t take care of them.”

*We are not killing the princess or Mark’s girlfriend. Wait, are they dating? I’m not sure.*

“Is that really the question you’re worried about right now?”

*It’s important! Important-ish. Okay, fine. Not really that important, but still. No killing them.*

Henry grunted. “Whatever you say. For what it’s worth, I don’t think they’ll try to betray us.”

*Then, we might as well see what Dredd is really capable of. I’ll start on my own. Step in if that doesn’t seem to be working.*

“Sounds good. Don’t win too quickly or I’ll be disappointed. I want a good fight.”

Damien chuckled, and Dredd cocked his head to the side.

“Are you finished speaking with Henry?”

“Yes,” Damien replied. “On your count, Dredd. We won’t be holding back.”

“It wouldn’t be very serious training if you were. Go.”

Damien reached out, and the cold wood of his staff met his palm. He wrapped his fingers around it and pulled it from the Void, casting a grayscale over the world. Jagged runes sprung to life around him, offering themselves up as his emotions muted.

Dredd’s mental energy extended toward Damien to seal him off from his Ether. Henry batted it away, and the professor’s lips pursed slightly.

“You can’t cut us off from the Ether that way.” Damien traced a rune circle in the air, and the lantern hanging from his staff glimmered with faint light. An empowered gravity lance screamed forward, a powerful gravitational pull stretching out from its tip.

Dredd tried to step into a portal, but the spell’s draw was so strong that he skidded across the ground toward it instead. The professor flicked his hand and another portal opened in front of him, teleporting him to safety before the spell detonated, shattering a tree and ripping a large portion of the ground beneath it to pieces.

Red threads crisscrossed through the air, expanding to cover Damien. There were far more than Dredd had ever used against the girls, and they formed a perfect hemisphere around him as they started to tighten.

“**Tear**,” Damien commanded. Waves of dark energy ripped from his body, slicing the threads into pieces and causing them to harmlessly dissipate into the air. Dredd pointed his staff at Damien and sent a bolt of energy screaming toward him.

Extending a hand, Damien cast Devour. The black disk yawned open before him, swallowing the spell. The lantern on Damien’s staff lit a dull, cherry red. He drew several jagged runes in the air, and the bolt that Dredd had sent hurtled back at him, empowered by strands of twirling purple Ether.

The professor stepped into a portal, avoiding the attack as he emerged behind a tree near Damien. Dredd slammed his staff into the ground, burying it a few inches into the soil.

“Come forth, Jormun,” Dredd intoned. His staff crackled with energy, then vanished in a flash. Red portals snapped open all around the clearing, ranging in size from a dinner plate to a door.

The professor stepped back into one, vanishing from view. Damien narrowed his eyes, scanning the portals. A bolt of energy shot out of one, but before it could even hit Damien, it disappeared through another.

“Those have a lot of Ether in them,” Henry warned. “Don’t get hit. It’ll be like getting caught in your Storm spell. This is his companion’s battle manifestation.”

Damien didn’t respond. The Void already had him calculating, searching for the optimal solution to deal with Dredd. He cast devour behind himself, absorbing a bolt an instant before it collided with his shoulder.

“**Shatter**.”

Black lines spiderwebbed out from Damien’s hand, stretching through the clearing before imploding with a loud *crash*. They ripped everything they touched apart, but the portals weren’t even slightly affected.

Out of the corner of his eye, Damien saw Dredd emerging from a portal, a huge scythe of red energy clasped in his hands. He Warp Stepped an instant before the strike carved through the air where he had been standing.

But, as fast as he was, Dredd was moving between portals, not compressing space. Even a fraction of a second counted for a lot, and Dredd wasn’t wasting any time. He was already behind Damien when he released his spell.

Henry surged into Damien’s mage armor, taking over it. A cloak sprawled out over Damien’s back as armor formed over his body. Dredd’s

strike rang off his shoulder guard with a clang, and then he was gone, back into the portal.

The eye on the front of Damien's chest piece snapped open and purple light flared within it. Dredd appeared an instant later from another portal, firing a bolt of energy. Tendrils erupted from the bottom of Damien's cloak and shot for him, sinking into the portals.

Henry yanked them back an instant later. Smoke rose from their tips where they'd been burned to a slag.

"No fair," Henry complained. "Everyone should get to use your portals!"

Damien gritted his teeth as he gathered as much Ether as he could before casting it out, forming several dozen gravity spheres throughout the clearing. He couldn't cover all of the portals, but he put one in front of all the nearest ones.

As soon as he felt Dredd emerge, he detonated every single one of them. Air twisted and screamed around them as the spells went off. He didn't hear any feedback from Dredd, though. The attacks had all missed.

"This is annoying," Henry growled. "Hold on. I've got an idea."

A single black wing snapped open on Damien's back, unfurling to its full length as a single eye snapped open within it. The world spiraled into darkness, a vortex of grays disappearing into Henry's orifice.

With it, Dredd's portals were torn apart. Dredd was forced to jump free of his magic as it dissipated. As soon as he did, Henry's eye snapped closed and color was spat back into the world like an unwanted meal.

Dredd staggered, and Damien hurled a gravity lance at him. The professor rolled to the side, then grabbed a thread from the air and yanked. A string that Damien had missed bound around his leg. Even as Henry cut it, the professor reared back, forming a thick bolt of red light in his hand, and hurled it at them.

It streaked through the air. Henry's wing whipped around, blocking it before it could strike home. It connected with a *sizzle* and a *pop*, and Henry hissed in annoyance. He and Damien hurled spells at Dredd, forcing the man back into the safety of his portals, which Henry promptly yanked away a second later.

The fight lasted for several minutes, and Damien quickly found himself cutting it close to the limits of what he was willing to use the Void for. He

dismissed it reluctantly, throwing the staff away and letting the world snap back into vibrant life.

No more than a few seconds later, Dredd lowered his hands with a sigh. His staff appeared beside him, and he took it, lips pursed. “Five minutes are up.”

“Wait, what?” Henry cried. “I wasn’t done! I had barely gotten started. More!”

“No,” Dredd said. “This exercise was for five minutes. It would be unfair to my other students to continue any further.”

“I think we’re quite okay,” Elania muttered, staring at Damien in awe. “Just keep doing whatever. We can take a breather.”

“That is unacceptable,” Dredd said. “Damien, obviously, has passed this test. The two of you, however, have not.”

“Passed,” Yui muttered. “It looked like he had the advantage there. Would he have won if that kept going?”

“I did not use my full manifestation.”

“That didn’t answer my question,” Yui pointed out.

“No,” Dredd agreed, giving Damien a serious look and inclining his head respectfully, “it did not.”

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dredd distributed water flasks full of healing water to the lot of them. After allowing them all a short pause to rest, he called Yui up once more, repeating the training. Elania came after her, but Damien wasn't called up again.

Despite Henry's muttered complaints, he was fine with that. Dredd was a powerful opponent, but training against a mortal wasn't what he really needed right now. The professor had probably come to the same conclusion, and he let Damien sit aside and work on his own while he trained the girls.

*Once it's time to start sparring with the Corruption, I'll step back in. It's probably better to give Yui and Elania more time with Dredd anyway.*

"I never got to win," Henry grumbled. "Boring. It would take all of a few minutes for us to fight him again. He's just scared."

*I highly doubt that's the case. If you want to fight him so badly, you could probably just ask. I doubt he'd say no.*

"Bah. That defeats the point. I'm not complaining because I actually want to try to change anything. I just want to whine."

A chuckle slipped out of Damien's lips before he could restrain himself, and he was punished by the smug emotions that entered his mind from Henry. Shaking his head, Damien pulled out a small sheaf of paper and started to draw runes on it. His companion formed a small, floating eye beside him and joined him in looking at the paper.

"Still working on the tracking spell for the Corruption Seed?"

"Yeah," Damien replied aloud. "I got wrapped up with Nolan's business, and I haven't had a great chance to work on it afterward. We've

got roughly three weeks to get this dealt with, which should coincide pretty well with the end of training.”

“Lucky us,” Henry said. He studied Damien’s work for a few moments, only glancing up as Dredd yanked Elania’s feet out from under her and threw her across the clearing. She slammed into a tree with a loud *crash*. Henry rolled his eyes and looked back down at the spell Damien was working on.

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In that manner, three days passed. Dredd brought them all tents and food instead of letting anyone return to Blackmist. That was perfectly fine with Damien, though he was starting to run low on paper to work with.

For every meal, Dredd distributed some of the driest, least tasty jerk meat Damien had ever eaten. Paired with the healing water that, while incredibly beneficial for taking care of wounds, tasted just about normal, it made for some very boring meals.

Luckily, with a little extra help from Henry, he was able to finalize his tracking spell on the night of the third day. Technically, he could have collected Dredd and Delph to go handle the Seed right then, but they still had a fair amount of time to work with, and as strong as it was, some training against the stronger members of the Corruption would be useful. As the fourth dawned, Damien pulled Dredd to the side before he could start their training.

“I’ve got the tracking spell worked out,” Damien said. “We should be able to locate the Corruption Seed whenever we’re ready. There are still about three weeks until we need to deal with it, right?”

“Two to be safe,” Dredd replied. “Well done on the spell. What are you thinking on handling it? Finish training or fight the Seed first?”

“I wasn’t expecting you to ask that,” Damien admitted. “I suppose it depends on if your training will actually be helpful for me or not. If it’s nothing more than beating on a Corrupted monster, we might as well go now. But if you’ve got something useful to show me, then I suppose we should do that first. I don’t want to take risks against a Corruption Seed.”

Dredd gave him a one-shouldered shrug and adjusted his weight to lean on his staff. “We might have been taking care of the small Corrupted

monsters that have been popping up, but this is your—and your companion's—fight. Delph and I are just here to help. We aren't as involved as you are, so you should make the final calls."

"Does Delph see it that way as well?" Henry asked, forming a mouth in Damien's shadow.

Dredd rolled his eyes. "Delph is Delph. The moment you tell him that spell is done, we're headed out to get killing. I wouldn't recommend letting him know until it's time."

"Good idea," Damien said. "I'd feel bad about keeping things from him, but..."

Dredd gave him a knowing nod. "You don't have to finish that one, I know all too well. He's a difficult person. Effective, but difficult."

Elania's tent rustled behind them as she pulled herself out, desperately trying to tame her unruly hair. Yui emerged a moment later at the noise, not looking much better herself. They both saw Damien and Dredd watching them and raised their eyebrows in unison.

"What?" Elania crossed her arms.

"Nothing," Damien replied.

"Did we miss something?" Yui asked. "Or did you finally decide to join into the training so Elania and I can get more than a few minutes of a breather before Dredd starts stripping the bark off trees with our faces again?"

"I believe it was clear that this particular exercise would do little to aid Damien," Dredd said. "It would be a waste of both his and my time, which is far better spent—as you put it—stripping the bark off trees."

"He's right," Elania said, rubbing her shoulder to try to work a bruise out of it. "I'd rather get the training if Damien doesn't need it."

Yui let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah, I would, too. I'm just complaining, ignore me. I already ate breakfast while pretending to be asleep so Dredd wouldn't bother me. I'm ready to start."

Dredd cocked an eyebrow and looked to Elania, who reddened.

"I did the same thing."

"Brilliant. What about you, Damien?"

"No need," Damien replied with a shrug. "I'm not really all that hungry. Are we changing up the training?"

"We are. Both of you have improved significantly over the last few days, and I believe we are ready to move up to the next stage. If you have

noticed, both Yui and Elania have been holding their own against me during our matches.”

“I haven’t been paying much attention,” Damien admitted, looking from one girl to the other. “But...how? I didn’t see you teaching any new spells or special fighting techniques. Three days shouldn’t be enough for all that much development.”

“The lack was not in ability, but in knowledge,” Dredd replied. “Granted, there is a lack of ability, too. I cannot fix that quickly, though. What I can fix is fighting sense and having a better grasp of their own talents. Typically, this comes from repeated battle experience. You and Henry have spent more than enough time fighting for your life, which is why there was little I could provide to aid you.”

“Huh. Fair enough,” Damien said with a shrug. “Time to fight the Corruption, then?”

“Quite,” Dredd agreed. He tapped his staff against the ground. A ripple of red energy spread out from it, washing over the clearing and lighting up the Corrupted monster where it stood, chained, at the corner of the clearing.

The camouflage covering it faded away, evaporating into the air and revealing the rocky giant. Dredd tapped his staff on the ground again and creature groaned, slowly rising to its feet. Standing fully upright, it was nearly three stories tall.

Uncomfortably long arms with large, stumpy fingers hung at its sides, and both its hands and feet were tipped with huge claws. As far as Damien could tell, the claws were entirely pointless—getting hit by anything that large would probably crush someone, sharp or not.

“So...what’s the exercise against this?” Yui asked, swallowing as the huge monster stared in their direction, flat black eyes dripping green acid.

“You will be doing the exact same thing you practiced against me,” Dredd replied. “Only, this time, the consequences will be considerably more important. I will stop it if it looks like you are about to die, but I will not move in any other situation.”

“You sure you’ve got enough healing water for this?” Elania drew Ether into herself, glancing from Dredd to the Corrupted monster.

“Quite,” Dredd replied. “As before, you will have five minutes to fight. Your objectives are twofold. First, you are to avoid dying. Second, you are to attempt to restrain the Corruption’s connection to the Ether. It will be temporarily restored while you fight.”

“Is that wise?” Yui asked.

Dredd pierced her with a flat stare. “You will need to be able to perform actions such as this on the field. It will never be safer than here. Better to learn now than too late. Your comrades’ lives will depend on it.”

Yui flinched. Dredd’s gaze didn’t waver until she gave a mollified nod. When she did, the man’s eyes softened.

“Fear is good, Princess. It shows you that you still have something to live for. Only when the fear is gone are you truly in great danger. Control your fear. Harness it. Emotions are guidance, not orders.”

“Man, I bet you wish Dredd was the guy that taught your class,” Henry said in Damien’s head. “He sounds so wise and all-knowing.”

*Put ourselves in Yui or Elania’s place for a moment. Look at that thing. It’s one of the biggest Corrupted monsters we’ve seen, and it’s the first one they’re ever going to fight. Do you really think they’re very pleased with his brilliant words right about now?*

Henry cackled. “Don’t care. Let’s go show these kids how it’s done.”

“Damien, will you and Henry start?” Dredd asked. “You’ve got experience handling the Corruption already, so hopefully watching how you go about this will be beneficial for our other students.”

“Good timing. Sure,” Damien said, rolling his shoulders and gathering his Ether as he walked toward the giant.

“I will release the restraints on the monster for five minutes,” Dredd said. “I believe this will be a fairly trivial task for you with Henry’s aid, so I would like to offer to spar your companion while you fight. I believe that should make it more entertaining for all of us.”

“Oh, now I know you’re the better brother,” Henry crowed, rising from Damien’s shadow with a flourish. “You’ve got this, Damien. Just don’t make it too fast, okay? If I don’t get any time to play, I’m going to go kill some goats.”

“Wait. Isn’t that dangerous?” Elania asked nervously. “What if Damien gets hurt?”

Dredd’s lips peeled back in a dry smile. “Doubtful. Are you satisfied with this, Damien?”

“Fine with me. Get it on with before Henry pops the blood vessels in his eyes from excitement.”

Dredd gave him a sharp nod. A flash of red lit the clearing as the runes on the collar faded. The chains holding it down dimmed, fading away and

freeing the monster's arms and legs. It took a step, crushing a tree beneath a massive foot, then threw its head back and let out a roar.

"Time's on," Dredd said.

Damien didn't need to be told twice. He Warp Stepped into the air and landed on the monster's shoulder. On the ground, Henry summoned a pool of darkness around himself and Dredd before sinking into it and vanishing from view.

A second roar split the air and the Corrupted monster lurched, raising a hand to grab Damien. He Warp Stepped again, this time appearing on top of the monster's head. Damien extended his net of mental energy.

To properly split the monster apart from its connection to the Ether, it would be easiest to do it all at once. And, to do that, he needed to know where all of the connections were. The monster batted at him, but its size proved to be a disadvantage.

Damien was just far faster than it was. He flickered to the ground, quickly tallying up the strands of energy that the monster had extended into the environment to feast from it. Several more attacks from the giant crashed into the ground, missing and finding nothing but dirt and trees.

A blanket of darkness washed over the world and Damien cursed, Warp Stepping reflexively as he lost sight of his opponent. He Warp Stepped several more times, just to make sure the creature didn't land a lucky blow on him.

The darkness vanished and Damien's eyes widened. He teleported again, narrowly avoiding a cumbersome hand as it whistled through the air, nearly catching him. Evidently, this monster didn't use its sight to hunt.

*I wonder if that's the Corruption giving it that trait, or if that was just natural. Considering its got eyes, I'm going to lean toward the former.*

"Don't do that again, Henry!" Damien yelled, Warp Stepping up to the top of the monster one more time. He did one last count of the dozens of strands of Ether extending from the monster, then sent out his own mental energy.

Without Henry's help, it was considerably harder than he had expected. A blow nearly caught Damien, but he teleported out of the way while keeping his hold on the mental energy tight. Slowly but surely, he gathered all of them up, pulling the strands together and, with a final tug, ripping them free of the giant.

A groan ripped out of its mouth and the red runes on its collar flared to life. Chains erupted from thin air, binding it and slamming the creature back to the ground. It twitched, then remained still. Damien released his grip on the Ether he'd liberated from the monster, and it slipped back to its normal state.

“Well done,” Dredd said from behind him. Damien turned to see a long, jagged cut running along the professor’s face and down his chest. Dredd took a long drink from a flask of healing water and capped it. “Your companion is...capable.”

“You should have used your Full Manifestation,” Henry said with a smug grin.

“And you shouldn’t be using that darkness spell when I’m trying to fight something,” Damien said, walking up and jabbing Henry in the chest. “That nearly got me swatted.”

“Whoopsie,” Henry said. “Noted.”

“Ah. We’ve learned something,” Dredd said, putting his hands together. “Good.”

“Yeah, yeah. Can I get a go at the Corruption, too?” Henry asked.

Damien rolled his eyes. “Let’s save it for the people who actually need the practice. We’ll go again once they have. I’ve got some ideas I want to try, though.”

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Yui was the next of the three to go. She passed Damien, still struggling to hide the surprise on her face, and stood across from the hulking Corrupted monster. The flickering red runes on its collar faded away and the chains vanished as Dredd released it.

Before the monster even had a chance to rise, Yui sent a large ball of flame hurtling toward its head. It struck home and billowed up around it with a loud *fwoosh*. The giant rose to its feet with a roar of pain, ignoring the fire as it licked at its rocky skin and sizzled against acid. It extended a huge hand and lunged for Yui, trying to grab her.

She summoned a thick pillar of jagged ice in its way, impaling the creature's palm. It ripped itself free, splattering acid across the ground, and lurched for her once more. Yui's training with Dredd reared its head, and she shot back, not letting the Corruption draw near to her as she barraged it with attacks.

The flame enveloping the creature's head faded away, leaving entirely undamaged stone. Any injury it might have caused healed as soon as the magic faded away, and the rest of the spells she tossed at it were having similar results.

Yui's face was creased in concentration, and from the sweat trickling down her brow, Damien could tell she was trying to grab the monster and restrain its leeching strands with her mental energy. He could also tell that she was having a lot less luck than he had.

Every time the giant swung at Yui, her concentration was broken, and she was forced to put more distance between herself and the monster. Even

though she'd been holding her own at the start, she was going to run out of Ether, while her opponent had no such difficulties.

"Not bad," Dredd said from beside Damien, drumming his fingers on the head of his staff.

"But not enough. She's not cutting off its source," Damien said. "If she can't cut it off soon, she'll lose."

Dredd raised an eyebrow. "Of course, she will. Only you would think this is a task that can be accomplished by a single student. Well, perhaps Sylph as well."

"You could do it on your own, couldn't you?"

"I'd certainly hope so. I'm a mage that's been on the frontlines," Dredd drawled. For the first time, in the dry sarcasm of Dredd's words, Damien saw the resemblance between him and his brother. "But I'm also twice your age and have far more experience. I would hope I can do more than a student."

"So, you're setting the other students up to fail?"

"Not to fail. To learn." Dredd raised his staff as Yui stumbled, her Ether spent. The giant froze mid-swing, grinding to a complete halt as chains erupted from the air and bound its limbs. They dragged it back to the ground, and the runes on the collar lit once more.

Yui pushed herself upright and took a moment to catch her breath before she walked back to join the others.

"That was horrible. Damien, how did you take that thing out? I remembered what you taught us, but there's a difference between a few little strands to bind and a blasted forest."

"Elania," Dredd said, gesturing to the Goldsilk girl. "You're up. Go."

"Seriously? I just heard what you said to Damien, you know. You *expect* us to fail!"

"I would be a fool not to. But I don't believe I said it was time for you to defeat the monster. I said it was your turn. I trust you see the subtle difference in those two phrases."

Elania's golden magic lit around her, and she swiped a panel to the side, glancing up at the glowing orb that she formed above the clearing. "Just making sure."

The monster's roar shook the clearing as its bindings were released once more. It scrambled toward Elania, loping on all fours to reach her faster. It

smashed through the trees and stumps in its way, acid dripping from its cracked mouth.

“I get the feeling the other groups are having similar difficulties,” Damien guessed as half a dozen glowing shields formed in the air before Elania. The giant’s cragged fist crashed through the first few but slowed to a stop by the time it reached her. She fired several golden bolts into its face, and it flinched, hissing in pain.

“Astute.”

“I feel like I might have been able to do it if the thing wasn’t permanently an inch from crushing me,” Yui said, trying and failing to brush some of the dirt from her clothes. “Damien, how are you able to hold your concentration while you cast other spells and avoid attacks? It seems impossible.”

“Get your psyche shattered a few times,” Damien replied, only half-joking. “When you squeeze the fragments back together, you’ll get a bit better at multitasking.”

Yui squinted at him, trying to tell how serious he was being. “Just what have you done to train yourself?”

“Not something you can replicate. Sorry. I think Dredd’s got the right idea, though. Just stick with what he teaches.”

“Thanks,” Dredd said dryly. “I’m glad to have your approval.”

Yui chewed her lower lip and turned her attention back to Elania. The Goldsilk girl was dashing around the monster, desperately trying to bind it in thick strands of light magic. Her efforts hadn’t completely failed, but with every new binding she enveloped the Corruption with, another one snapped and frayed.

Her magic grew weaker with every pass, but Elania didn’t relent. Her fight came to an end as several of the strands snapped at once and the giant tore an arm free, bringing it down toward her with the force of a mountain.

Dredd vanished through a portal, appearing beside Elania even as ethereal red chains enveloped the monster’s body. He raised his staff, a glowing circle forming above it, and the giant’s fist crashed into it. His magic shuddered but held firm, and the giant was restrained an instant later.

“A fair attempt,” Dredd said.

Elania let her arms drop and sighed heavily. “How are we supposed to stop that thing? It doesn’t take damage. It doesn’t get tired. I can’t even see

how we're supposed to cut it off from the Ether if we're one small slip away from getting crushed at any moment. Is there a trick to this, Damien?"

"There is," Dredd said before Damien could respond. "Now, who wants to go next?"

"Are you going to tell us the trick?"

"Not yet," Dredd replied, almost sounding cheerful. Almost. "Yui, you look like you want another go. Drink some water and get out there."

"What about Damien?"

"He'll have time later," Dredd replied. "I don't want the monster to get too tired before you and Elania have your practice against it."

"You care more about the monster than you do about us!" Yui exclaimed in exasperation.

"Correct," Dredd said. "It is a very valuable training tool. You are students, and we've got a lot of those."

Yui's eyes widened in shock. "Excuse me?"

"He's joking," Elania said, rolling her eyes. "At least, I think he is."

"The world may never discover. But I will be unsealing the Corrupted monster shortly, so I suggest you prepare yourself. If you can't match it, then we're returning to training with me instead. And if we do that, I can promise you will not enjoy it."

Elania held out a flask of healing water, and Yui took it, upending it into her mouth and splashing the last bit over her face. She gave it back to the other girl with an appreciative nod, then ran back out to meet the Corruption as Dredd released its restraints once more.

*Well, if he was going for team building, it's certainly working. Elania and Yui are treating each other like friends.*

"Yui usually treats people like that when she isn't pulling the princess card," Henry replied in his mind. "But Elania is certainly more cordial with her now than she used to be."

The ground shook, and all of them winced as the giant narrowly missed crushing Yui. She'd managed to shove herself to safety with a pillar of ice, but the monster was right on her heels.

She hopped around, avoiding the massive strikes crashing into the ground around her, while she peppered the giant with spells, trying to restrain its movement with ice for long enough to bind its connection to the Ether.

The fight didn't last as long as the first. Dredd had to intervene once more, and Yui trudged back to swap places with Elania. In that manner, they continued training throughout the rest of the day.

At night, while Elania and Yui went to bed, Damien met Dredd at the edge of the clearing. Neither of them had to say anything. Dredd just nodded and released the bindings on the monster.

Damien wasn't worried about waking Yui or Elania up. After all the work they'd put in that day, he was pretty sure they'd sleep through a thunderstorm, and what he had planned for the Corruption probably wouldn't be much quieter.

Throughout the night, he and Henry trained against the monster. Neither of them were worried about failing to bind the monster—that was simple. Instead, they focused on speed. Damien pushed himself, trying to find ways to take it out as quickly as possible while using as little Ether as he could.

Dredd supplied him with healing water between rounds, and he trained until only an hour was left until sunrise. Every fight, he got just a little faster. His movements became a dash more optimized, and he and Henry found ways to cut the Corruption's connection to the Ether around it just a bit sooner. When he was finally done, he collapsed into bed to take what little rest was still left in the night.

The following morning, Damien awoke to the sounds of training. He emerged from his tent, wiping his eyes, to find Dredd and the girls already at the clearing, practicing. Yui's Ether ran dry, and she threw herself to the side to avoid a strike as Dredd ended the fight.

The sun had already made its trek into the sky, and it was several hours past daybreak. Damien walked over to join Dredd as Elania swapped with Yui and the fights resumed. The rest of that day and the next were the same, with the girls training throughout the sunlight hours and Damien taking over at evening.

Dredd started calling out suggestions for the girl's fights, pointing out weaknesses in the monster's movements or flaws in their own. Their battle prowess continued to improve, but neither Yui nor Elania managed to bring the monster down on their own. The growing frustration was evident in both of them, but they pressed as hard as they could to try and meet Dredd's expectations.

On the third day, as Damien emerged from his short hours of sleep to meet with the others, he was surprised to find that the monster was still

bound and none of them were training.

“You slept in again,” Yui observed.

“Late night.”

“Why haven’t we started yet?” Elania asked. “Damien is awake now, so could we get to it? I feel like we’re getting closer.”

“Closer, yes,” Dredd agreed. “But, as I said on the first day of this training, you’ll never reach the goal. We don’t have the time for you to continue to incrementally approach.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Yui asked with a frown. “You’re giving up?”

“Giving up? No. This portion of the training is complete,” Dredd said. “You and Elania are both more than capable of performing the tasks required of you.”

“But we haven’t even beaten it once,” Elania protested.

“That’s what the teams are for,” Yui said, realization finally dawning on her. “We’re regrouping with them, aren’t we? You were showing us that nobody could take the Corrupted monsters out on their own.” She glanced at Damien, then cleared her throat. “Almost nobody.”

“Very good,” Dredd said. “And correct. The rest will be explained once we’ve matched back up with the other students. It would be a pain to go over everything multiple times. And thus, we wait. This clearing was the largest of the ones we have, so the others will be joining us here.”

“Couldn’t you have just told us that at the start?” Elania asked.

Dredd looked down the bridge of his nose at her in complete confusion. “Why would I do that? If you believed that the others were performing just as poorly as you, you would have been less motivated. There is no room for us to take such liberties. Besides, didn’t you have fun?”

*Yep. He’s definitely Delph’s brother.*

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTEEN

People began arriving a few minutes later, popping into the clearing through Dredd's portals. Sylph, Gaves, and the other close combat fighters were the first to arrive, followed after by Delph. All of them were haggard and, other than Sylph, were all covered in small cuts and wounds. Carson brushed a thin layer of dirt off his blonde hair and waggled his fingers at Yui, who grinned and waved in response.

Even Delph looked a little more tired than normal. He had small bags under his eyes and his stubble was thicker than normal. It was only a few days away from becoming a scruffy beard. The professor chewed on a small twig and spat it onto the ground, nodding in greeting at Dredd and Damien.

The other students all arrived shortly afterward. Everyone looked exhausted and worn to the bone, but not a single one of them looked like they were ready to give up. Determination ruled everyone's expressions, mixed in with the weariness and sweat that had built up from days of work.

Kat and Aven were the last to arrive. Of everyone in the clearing, the two of them looked like they'd had it the worst. Kat's clothes were torn up and her eyebrows scorched. Aven's hair stuck out in every direction as if she'd been struck by a bolt of lightning and she had more wounds than any of the others.

Damien couldn't help but notice Quinlan hadn't returned with the others. Everyone else, including Bella and Viv, had gotten back, and none of them looked concerned, so he figured it likely wasn't anything to worry about.

"What happened to all of you?" Elania asked, her eyes going wide. "Did you forget to bring healing water?"

“Of course not,” Delph said irritably. “We just ran out. What have you lot been doing? Dredd taking it easy on you?”

“I never go easy,” Dredd said. “I just have enough foresight to pack sufficient supplies.”

He dug several flasks of healing water out of a portal and distributed them amongst the students, pointedly not handing one to Delph. Everyone gratefully accepted them, draining the flasks within seconds.

“Babying the children won’t get them ready for the field,” Delph said. “It’s not realistic.”

“They can train harder when they aren’t broken.”

“Don’t start this now, boys,” Kat said, stepping between them. “We’ve got a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it. Or have you forgotten?”

Dredd grunted. “True enough. Let’s get to the point then. I trust all your students have gathered the reason why we’ve reconvened?”

“We aren’t strong enough to take on the Corruption alone,” Xil said. “We need to work in teams, so we’re going to pair up.”

“Correct,” Delph said, clapping his hands once. “Every team needs one person that can hold the Corruption’s attention and one person who can seal its powers off. Ideally, we’d have more than that. Probably two to hold the monsters back, one to seal it, and a support. Unfortunately, we don’t have the manpower for that. So, for the time being, you’ll be working with a single partner.”

“Please pair up with a student. Ranged with close combat,” Kat said. “No pairing with supports. They’ll have their own roles. Feel free to spend some time thinking this through. It’s important that you are able to fight well together with your teammate. Your life will depend on it.”

Damien and Sylph walked over to each other. Mark and Elania decided in an equally short time, but the other students walked around for a little longer, talking amongst themselves to determine what the best pairings would be.

In the end, to nobody’s surprise, Carson ended up paired with Yui. That left Gaves, Xil, and Venus without a partner. Damien caught Gaves glancing in Bella’s direction, but the boy just turned his attention to the teachers instead of saying anything.

“I’ll be pairing with one of you,” Aven said. “The other two will be assigned to the support team to make sure their jobs aren’t interrupted

during any large fights.”

“I’ll go with the support team,” Gaves said immediately.

“As will I,” Xil volunteered.

“Very well. Then, Aven will be working with Venus,” Dredd said, nodding to the two. “These teams are still up for change. If any of you feel like you have chosen poorly, move quickly to either solve the issue or swap partners. Do we have any complaints with the current assignments?”

Nobody said anything. Dredd and Delph waited a few more moments before continuing.

“Then, we can begin the next, and most important, stage. The first thing you’ll need to learn is how to fight as one. You need to understand the way your partner fights perfectly. If you don’t, you’ll get in each other’s way.”

“What about us?” Viv asked.

“And Quinlan?” Damien added. “Where is she?”

“Quinlan is getting some personal training from another teacher,” Delph said. “She’ll be joining the support team as a third guard once she’s done. It shouldn’t be too much longer. And, as for the support team, they’ll be watching all of you to spot flaws in the way you fight as well as see how they’ll be able to best aid all of you while on the field.”

“Let’s just get started with the exercise,” Aven suggested, not looking excited in the slightest.

“Agreed,” Dredd said. “You will start by getting to know each other. Intimately.”

They all stared at him.

“Not like that,” Dredd snapped. “Normally, relationships are forged through suffering. It takes years to build that level of trust, but we can skip a few steps if you open yourself to your partner. Share secrets. Do whatever you want to if it lets you know them better.”

Damien and Sylph exchanged an amused glance. Delph caught it and rolled his eyes.

“Yes, some of you are already very well acquainted. Don’t give me that look. Do you like being unique? Maybe I should pick some flowers for both of you to put in your hair so you can stand out even more.”

“Ignore Delph,” Dredd said. “He’s just jealous that others can have a relationship without making the other person hate them within the span of a few weeks.”

“I am nothing of the sort.”

“Just go talk with your partners,” Dredd said, waving his hand dismissively. “We’ll reconvene tomorrow. I want to stress this—do not treat this as a joke. Get to know your teammate. It might be awkward now, but you aren’t marrying them. And, if you don’t, it could end up costing you your lives later. Delph, Aven, come with me and the support team. We should start preparing. Everyone else is dismissed until daybreak tomorrow.”

The professors walked over to join the support team, while everyone else slowly broke off in pairs and walked off to put some distance between themselves and everyone else. Damien and Sylph sat down in the center of the clearing. Neither of them had any further secrets or hidden truths to bare clean, so they gossiped instead.

“What was Delph’s training this time?” Damien asked.

“He had a Corrupted Monster. Dredd, too?”

“Yeah. Dredd trained against us himself for a while before we got to that, though. I got to see his battle manifestation, and Henry beat him while he was using it. The Corrupted monster wasn’t all that much stronger than the other ones we’ve fought, but it was a bit harder to deal with without Henry’s help.”

“Sounds about the same as the one I fought,” Sylph said. “Ours was on the weaker side, but it was pretty fast.”

“As fast as you?”

A tiny grin flickered across her face. “Not even close. I just cut it apart and stole the Ether from it while it was trying to draw it in. Technically doesn’t count as cutting it off since it was still connected, I was just drawing all the energy out before it reached it, but it still works.”

“What about the others?”

Sylph grimaced. “Not quite as good. Mark was the closest. He couldn’t actually stop the monster from connecting to the Ether, but he managed to damage it faster than it could recover, so basically a tie in his favor. The others weren’t able to beat it. They got closer, but nobody could cut it off from the Ether while it was attacking them.”

“We had the same issue.”

They fell into a comfortable silence for a few moments, both looking around the clearing to see how things were going for the others. Henry stretched out from Damien’s shadow, peeling away from the ground just enough to be noticeable.

“You think they’re sharing anything fun? I want to listen.”

“No,” Damien said. “Imagine what would happen if someone saw you. Everyone would feel too uncomfortable to share things about themselves and the entire exercise would be ruined.”

“I could share things about myself. Here, watch: Hi, guys, I’m Henry. Extraplanar monster with an appreciation for goats and the finer things in life. My favorite book is *Love Making for the Uninitiated and Lustful*, and this is my first time attending these meetings.”

Sylph snickered and Damien glared at her.

“Don’t encourage him.”

“You can’t blame Sylph, Damien,” Henry said. “After all the novels I read in Blackmist’s library, I am now an expert on what the female gender finds attractive. Male gender, too, actually. Spent a bit checking those out.”

“Do you ever think the Faceless looks at you and wonders where it went wrong?”

Henry scoffed. “Knowledge is knowledge, and this is your human spark’s fault. I can’t say it’s been particularly useful, but it’s quite amusing.”

“I’ve got a question,” Sylph said, raising a finger as her brow furrowed. “Jokes aside...do you actually understand the concept of romance or attraction? It’s not something native to you, is it?”

Henry’s grin fell off. “No, it isn’t. And...I’m not sure, honestly. Logically, sure. I know what lust is, and it’s what enables mortal beings such as yourselves to continue their existence on the Mortal Plane without all dying off.”

“That’s not romance, though. That’s just breeding.”

“So, it is.” Henry grunted. “I know what romance is, but no. It’s not a concept that works for me. But...I think I understand friendship.”

He slipped back into Damien’s shadow and went silent. Damien’s eyebrows rose slightly, and Sylph gave him a half-shrug. She leaned against him and craned her head back, looking up into the sky. A few minutes passed in silence.

“Have you made any progress on finding the Corruption Seed?” Sylph asked.

“Yeah. The spell is ready. We’re just waiting until training is done to make sure we’re as ready as we possibly can be.”

“And there’s no way it can sprout or whatever beforehand?”

“Not as far as Delph and Dredd seem to believe. Henry and Herald didn’t object either, so that shouldn’t be an issue. We just need to make sure we take care of it when we go.”

Sylph murmured her understanding. “After we take the Seed out, we’re going to need to go fight the Void, aren’t we?”

“Yeah. The balance might get thrown off too hard if we don’t.”

It was another minute before Sylph spoke again.

“Do you think we’ll ever be done with this? Or are we going to be fighting the rest of our lives?”

“I don’t know,” Damien said softly. His hand tightened around the grass next to him, digging through the dirt and pulling it up. “But I’d like to believe that it’ll be done soon.”

Sylph nodded, and they both fell silent. They remained seated for the rest of the day, watching the sun move through the sky and make its descent toward the horizon. When night fell, the professors wordlessly distributed tents for everyone. The last hushed whispers faded away into the dark sky as everyone retired for the night. Damien and Sylph slid into their tent and fell asleep, nothing left to be said.

The following morning arrived before anyone wanted it to, and before long, everyone stood in a small semicircle around the professors.

“I trust you all know each other more than you did yesterday,” Dredd said. “Does anyone have a request to swap teams before we continue?”

Nobody said anything. A few students exchanged embarrassed glances, but that was the extent of it. Dredd gave them an approving nod.

“Good. In that case, we’ll get started in a moment. One more instructor and Quinlan will be joining us, as she’s finished her training.”

He tapped the butt of his staff on the ground and a red portal yawned open beside him. Its surface rippled as Quinlan emerged from within it, followed by a short woman wearing old, polished armor. It was slim fitting, covering vital areas while making sure she had more than enough room to move.

Glimmering white light wrapped around her, filling the open spaces around the armor and forming a helm over her head. The helm faded away, revealing a kind smile and brown eyes.

“This is Hilla,” Dredd said. “She’s a retired mage from the front lines and an incredibly powerful Light magic user.”

Hilla smiled, waving to all of them. Her gaze fell on Damien and her grin grew even larger as she walked up to him, raising her arms for a hug.

“Damien! How have you been? I’m sorry to spring things on you, but Dredd asked me to come help train you and your friends.”

“I’m sorry,” Damien said, a frown stretching across his face as he took a step backward. “Do I know you?”

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CHAPTER

# NINETEEN

Hilla's smile faltered and her arms dropped. "What? Damien, what are you talking about? It's me."

Damien glanced at Delph to see if the professor was trying to mess with him, but his expression was just as confused as Damien's was.

"I don't think I know you. Are you sure you haven't mixed me up with someone?" Damien asked.

"Damien," Sylph said. "That's your mom."

He blinked. "What? No, she isn't."

"Unless I was drastically misinformed about something, she most certainly is," Delph said. He gave Damien a baffled glance. "Did you get hit on the head when sparring Dredd?"

Damien squinted at Hilla. Nothing about her features seemed familiar to him. Confusion and hurt washed over the woman's face, but try as he might, Damien couldn't dredge anything up.

"This isn't a particularly funny joke," Damien said. "I've never met this woman in my life. I'd like to know how Delph managed to convince Sylph to join in on this, though."

Sylph's eyes widened as a thought struck her. She put a hand on Damien's shoulder. "We need to talk. Privately."

He frowned, then nodded. "One moment, Professors."

Hilla reached for him, but Damien had already Warp Stepped, taking Sylph along with him. They both appeared at the far side of the clearing, near the edge of the tree line and well out of hearing of everyone else.

"What's going on, Sylph?"

“Your memory,” Sylph said urgently. “Remember what you told me about your meeting with the leader of the Void? The one without a face. You lost a memory, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. But that was a memory! Are you telling me that the woman over there,” Damien nodded toward the group of students and professors in the middle of the clearing, “is my mother?”

“Do you really think I’d lie to you about something like this?”

“No,” Damien said immediately. “But...that’s a lot more than a single memory. That’s a whole person.”

“You don’t remember anything? Can you tell me something about your mother?”

Damien opened his mouth to respond, but no words emerged. He dug through his mind, but there was just nothing there. Damien was certain he *had* a mother. Everyone did. He had a house, too, in Ardenford. He pursed his lips, an uneasy tingle running down his spine.

He dug even deeper, searching for the slightest fragment. There was nothing. There wasn’t even enough to realize that something was missing. If Sylph hadn’t been standing beside him, her hand squeezing his hand with a deadly serious look in her eyes, he would have dismissed the notion entirely.

It wasn’t like the memories Herald had damaged when he’d first arrived on the Mortal Plane. Damien could tell those were missing—they’d been carved and modified to avoid shattering his mind.

These just simply...weren’t.

“You’re serious?” Damien breathed. “That’s my mom?”

“I stayed at your house. Do you remember that?”

“Yeah. Nolan and Yui and the others all showed up, too.”

“And you don’t remember your mom? She was there, too.”

Damien scrunched his eyebrows together. Then, he shook his head. “No. It was just us, wasn’t it? The house was empty aside from that.”

“No, it wasn’t. Your mom was there. She made us food.”

A dull headache thumped in the back of Damien’s mind.

*Henry?*

“I’m already looking through your mind,” Henry said, his voice just as serious as Sylph’s had been. “But that woman is your mother, even if I can’t seem to find any trace of her in your mind.”

“Henry recognizes her, too,” Damien muttered. He squinted across the clearing, trying to get another look at Hilla, but they were too far to make any real details out. “He’s looking to see if I’ve got any memories of her, but he can’t find anything.”

Sylph squeezed his hand, her eyes searching for his. Damien could tell she was trying to comfort him, but the emotion he felt wasn’t what he suspected she thought he did.

*How can I feel sad for losing something I never had? At least, I can’t remember ever having it. If it never happened in my mind, the only one suffering is my mom.*

“That isn’t the right way to see things,” Henry said. “This is part of you. From the memories you have—*had*—of your mother, she was a very good person. You learned a lot from her, and you cared for her deeply. Losing those memories is not good. Humans are nothing more than bundles of memories, tied together by hopes and dreams. Without her, you’ve lost part of what makes you, well, you.”

*Is there anything I can do about that? The Corruption and the Void are both knocking at our door, Henry. I don’t have time to think about myself.*

“You’re colder. You’ve been getting colder for a while. I thought it was just more of my soul seeping into you mixed in with the constant fighting, but this might account for some of that, too. Getting more pragmatic isn’t bad, but dismissing this loss as nothing isn’t the way to handle it.”

*So, what do you suggest? The memories are gone, Henry. If they weren’t, you would have found them already. You’ve been in my mind for longer than I have, and even though I couldn’t remember what I lost, I remember how I lost them. They were burned by some sort of Void flame. There’s no recovering from that.*

Henry had no response for that. Damien felt him rooting around in his mind, shuffling through memories and trying to fit a puzzle with no pieces back together. He sighed and shook his head.

“Are you okay?” Sylph asked.

“I don’t know how to answer that,” Damien admitted. “Imagine a man walked up to you and said he was your brother who stood by your side every day until you arrived at Blackmist.”

“I don’t have a brother.”

“Exactly.”

“You can’t tell your mom that. It would crush her.”

“Did you know her well?” Damien’s eyebrows rose. “How many times did you meet her?”

Sylph gave him a sad smile. “Just once, but it was enough for me to get to know her. She’s a very kind woman, and you mean the world to her. Please, be gentle with how you word things, even if they’re true.”

Damien winced. “Have I really gotten that bad? Henry warned me that I was getting colder.”

“If words had cushion, yours would be metal.”

“Right. Pretty bad.”

Sylph gave him a half-shrug. “I don’t mind it myself. I’ve never been one to dance around when talking. But this isn’t about me. Is there any way you can get those memories back?”

“None that I know. Henry’s working on it, I guess. The only thing I can really think of would be some sort of Void spell to inverse the effects of the first, but I’m pretty sure it’s far too late for anything like that. My memories are gone not hidden.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Sylph said, squeezing his hand again. “What do you want to do about your mom? Do you want to try to keep distance between you until things can get worked out?”

“No point. If she’s like how you described her, that would probably just hurt even more, wouldn’t it?” Damien shook his head. “It would be best to tell her I suffered an injury that temporarily damaged some of my memories. Those are the words that are least likely to make her sad.”

“So, you think it’s temporary?”

Damien’s face darkened. “No. Almost certainly not. But temporary would make her feel better, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose it would.”

“Let’s head back, then. I don’t want to make this into anything too big, or it might mess up everyone else’s training. I-I think I might need to think on things later.”

“I’ll be there,” Sylph promised. “Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

He sent Sylph back to the clearing and Warp Stepped after her, appearing where he’d been standing before they’d left. Hilla flinched at their arrival, and Delph’s eyes flicked to the side in shame.

“Damien?” Hilla asked hesitantly.

“Mom. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you at first,” Damien said, giving her a weak smile. He stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. “I had an injury that temporarily damaged my memories.”

Hilla pulled him closer, her arms tightening around his back. Damien resisted the urge to pull away. She released him a moment later, moving her hands up to his shoulders and leaning back to peer at his face.

“What happened? How were you injured? What are they treating you with? How long until you’re recovered? Why didn’t anyone tell me about this?”

“That’s a lot of questions,” Damien said, rubbing the back of his head. “I got into a fight with a pretty powerful entity inside my mind. I managed to win, but it messed up some stuff on the way out. My companion is working on fixing things up. I think it should be healed in a month or two.”

“Liar,” Henry muttered in his head. “Even if I figure out a fix, there’s no way it’ll be that fast.”

*The Corruption will be dealt with in a few months, one way or another. It won’t matter anymore after that.*

“How bad are your injuries?” Hilla asked, moving Damien’s head as if she could try to spot where he’d been hurt. “You’re sure nothing else was damaged?”

“Nothing,” Damien promised. “Things are just a bit shaken up. Don’t worry too much.”

Hilla gave him a suspicious frown, then shook her head and sighed. “Okay. I’m probably embarrassing you. I just worry, Damien.”

“It’s fine, Mom. Thanks.” The words felt awkward on Damien’s lips, but they seemed to be enough to sate Hilla for the time. She nodded, releasing him, and took a step back. After a short pause, she glanced at him again.

“You’re sure you’re okay? Nothing else is wrong?”

“I’m fine,” Damien lied. “Nothing else, and it’s not total amnesia. A few things are just a bit loose. Don’t worry about me.”

“Okay. I’m sorry for that, everyone.”

“It’s quite understandable,” Dredd said. “Any mother would be worried about her child. I’m sure all the students enjoyed their brief reprieve from training, but I fear it has come to an end. Shall we begin, Hilla?”

“Yes, that would be best,” Hilla said. She paused, then glanced from Damien to Delph. “Just one more question. Damien, was your injury caused

by or somehow related to Delph?”

“I— Technically, no,” Damien said. “Technically.”

“Technically?”

“I’m not sure I’m at liberty to discuss it. It wasn’t his fault, though.”

Hilla grunted. “I see. But he wasn’t *not* at fault?”

“I’m sensing some targeted questions here,” Delph said.

“I think they’re fair, considering you injured just as many mages as you killed monsters.”

“That’s hardly true,” Delph complained. “Do you have any idea how many monsters I killed on the frontlines?”

“Do you have any idea how much collateral damage you caused?”

“Okay, fair,” Delph admitted. “But I’m confident I wasn’t *that* bad. Besides, I was your son’s main teacher. Come on, Damien. Back me up a little so your mom doesn’t rip me a new breathing hole.”

“Delph has taught me a lot,” Damien admitted. “And nearly killed me a few times—intentionally, once. But I survived, and I suppose I could have had worse.”

“Gee, thanks,” Delph said. “Glowing praise.”

“If anything, I should be surprised that he survived this long with you as a teacher,” Hilla muttered. “Right, then. We’ll be talking later, Delph. You, too, Damien. Until then, I’ll get to actually doing my job. Line up for me, kids. Let’s see how badly your instructors have prepared you for a real fight.”

Damien moved with the others, ignoring the glances they sent in his direction, and stood shoulder to shoulder with Sylph and Quinlan, who sent him a worried glance. He returned it with a forced smile and turned his attention to the woman who was apparently his mother, unable to still the unease stirring in his stomach.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

Hilla clearly suspected that something was remiss despite Damien's assurances otherwise, but with the rest of the class waiting for training and no way to know for sure he was lying, she got to fulfilling her part in teaching.

She had each of the teams go through basic training on combat strategy, but Damien found himself only paying her words surface-level attention. He kept stealing glances at Hilla, trying to find the resemblances they shared. Even though everyone was telling him that Hilla was his mother, it just felt...wrong.

Hilla started setting the groups up against the chained Corrupted monster. Damien and Sylph sat that particular exercise out, as all of the other students needed to experience fighting it more than they did.

This time around, with Hilla calling out suggestions from the sidelines, the battles went completely differently. In just the span of a few minutes, Aven and Venus took the corrupted monster down.

That received somewhat muted applause, as Aven was far from just a student. However, Mark and Elania's attempt went equally as well, and the Corrupted monster fell for the second time in a row.

After each round, Hilla pulled the students to the side and went over what they had done correctly and where they could improve. Even just from watching her, Damien could tell the woman genuinely cared.

"Do you want to practice?" Sylph asked after the third round of fights had gone by.

"I suppose it couldn't hurt," Damien admitted. "I'm just not sure how much benefit we're going to gain against something like this. Our targets

are the Seeds and Second not the normal soldiers. Still, I guess something is better than nothing. Let's do it."

They walked up to the line, watching as Carson took the brunt of the Corruption's attention while Yui split it off from the Ether. It let out one final roar before Carson drove a flame-covered fist into the monster's chest, sending it rolling across the ground and silencing it.

Delph's chains snapped back around the creature, and Yui released it, allowing the large crater in the monster's chest to start sealing back up. Hilla approached the two, giving them an approving smile.

"Good job, both of you," Hilla said. "You work well together. Carson, you were spending a lot of Ether there. Try to keep your usage to just above the bare minimum. From what Delph and Dredd have told me, it's likely that we'll be fighting a horde of these monsters. That means you won't have the energy to spare, so just focus on protecting yourself and Yui. Don't attack until she's cut it off from the Ether."

"Understood," Carson said with a curt nod. He sent a glance at the kneeling monster. "When you say horde...?"

"We don't know anything for sure," Delph said. "But expect a lot. There are other mages that will be involved, of course. You aren't expected to hold them all off on your own. Other students are undergoing similar training with other professors—just not quite as good."

"Why do we get special treatment?" Xil asked.

Everyone glanced at Yui, who reddened. Delph smirked.

"The good princess is part of it, but not the entire reason. To be frank, you get the top of the line tutelage because I'm the best teacher money can buy. I'm glad that you've all finally started to acknowledge the incredible benefits you gain from being associated with me."

"Does severe trauma count as one of those benefits?" Elania asked. "Because you aren't even my teacher and I feel like I've aged twenty years since meeting you."

Delph squinted at her. "Bah. You're from Goldsilk, right? Sounds like their teachers have gotten lax if you think this is anywhere near problematic."

"A discussion for a later date," Dredd said, tapping his staff impatiently. "Perhaps you should work on that inability to focus on one topic for more than a few minutes, brother. I believe Damien and Sylph are waiting their turn."

Delph grunted. “My agile mind is envied by all. Go on, then. Let’s see it.”

The bindings on the Corrupted monster faded and it lurched to its feet with a roar.

“Remember to stick to your roles,” Hilla suggested as Damien and Sylph walked forward. “Sylph is the close combatant, so it’s her job to keep the Corruption’s attention while Damien cuts its connection to the Ether. Good luck, you two! I’m looking forward to seeing how you do this.”

Sylph glanced at Damien, who inclined his head slightly. Her battle manifestation enveloped her with faint, shimmering white armor. A disk of white erupted beneath Sylph’s foot, and she blurred, reappearing before the Corruption.

A scythe sprouted from her back, carving across the giant’s chest. It roared, reaching out to grab her even as the wound started to creep shut. Damien extended his mental energy, wrapping it around the threads of Ether connected to the Corruption.

With its attention on Sylph, it was even easier than before. With a single tug, the monster was stripped naked of Ether. Damien extended a hand, forming an overloaded Gravity Sphere at its chest. He clenched his hand shut and Sylph vaulted back, the scythe retracting into her back as the spell went off.

Stone shattered and the monster screamed, crashing to the ground with an enormous crater in its chest. Dredd’s bindings snapped back into place, and Damien discarded the strands of Ether, letting the monster greedily drink in power before it could die from the savage wound. The entire fight had taken less than a second.

“You were right,” Sylph said, dismissing her wind armor. “We should probably sit this exercise out.”

“That was marvelous,” Hilla said, clapping softly. “Swift and deadly, without any wasted Ether—though I think you might have been able to get away with a more direct finishing blow, Damien. That might have been a bit of overkill, and there’s no reason to waste good Ether.”

“I’m not particularly good at small, direct attacks. I’ll keep that in mind, though. Thanks.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Mom.”

Hilla beamed. “It’s not of all that much use. You’ve gotten very strong, Damien. Your father would be proud. Have you spoken with him recently?”

Delph choked on his saliva and doubled over coughing. He turned away when Hilla sent him an annoyed look, and Damien took that moment to exchange a baffled glance with Sylph.

*Apparently, Derrod hasn't spoken with Hilla recently. I guess it would have been too much to ask to lose my memories of him instead of her, huh?*

"That might have actually been worse," Henry muttered in his mind. "What if you forgot how much of a raging prick he was?"

"He's well aware of my growth," Damien said diplomatically. "I'm surprised he didn't tell you anything about the trip to Forsad. We fought together against Second, the leader of the Corruption. Not very long, but we did fight for a bit."

Hilla pressed her lips together. "I'm afraid I haven't seen him recently. Your father has been very busy on jobs for the queen as of late. Once all this Corruption business is wrapped up with, I'm hoping he'll have some time off to catch up with both of us."

"Yeah," Damien said, clearing his throat. "Right. We should probably get back to training. I think Mark is going to start attacking the monster while it's still chained down if you don't give him another go."

"I was considering it," Mark admitted, giving Damien a grin. "But I felt that a bound opponent would not be worth the effort."

He and Elania stepped up, and the training began once more. Damien and Sylph didn't go again, instead choosing to slip away and sit near the edge of the clearing to just watch the rest of the students practice.

The rest of the day passed by quickly. After Hilla was satisfied with everyone's performance, she started integrating the support team. That slowed things down at first, as the smaller duos had just started to get used to working with each other, but it quickly started to show dividends.

It took less and less time for the teams to take out the Corruption, and several teams started to get nearly as fast as Damien and Sylph. Whenever Quinlan stepped into the fight, she was able to immobilize the Corruption with her lava and whichever team she was aiding would dispatch it shortly afterward.

When the day grew too late for them to continue working, Delph and Dredd distributed dinner amongst everyone. They ate under the rising moon, most of them far too exhausted to make much conversation. Damien spotted Hilla making her way toward them and quickly retreated to his tent, doing his best not to make eye contact with her.

*The last thing I need is for her to ask me questions and realize I don't remember anything at all. That'll just screw over the training for everyone else.*

Sylph followed after Damien, and Hilla was intercepted by Mark as he asked her to spar with him. Somehow, despite being the one to fight the Corruption the most that day, he still had energy to spare. That worked great for Damien and Sylph, though. Only when the tent flap had fallen shut behind Damien and he was seated on his sleeping bag did he let out a sigh and lower his guard.

“What are you thinking?” Sylph asked, sitting down beside him.

“Everyone is doing pretty well. They’ll probably hold the Corruption off no problem, so long as there aren’t too many of them.”

“That’s not what I meant. Can you really do this for a week or two longer?” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Even if you don’t remember her, you can’t tell me it doesn’t hurt at least a little.”

“I can handle pretending for a little while. As long as we don’t have to have any long conversations, it shouldn’t be that hard to keep up the act,” Damien said, running a hand through his hair and down the side of his face. “Really, it’s fine. Other people have lost more.”

“It’s not a competition.” Sylph put a hand on his knee. “And there’s nothing wrong with feeling loss for something you can’t remember having. I wish I met my real parents sometimes, but I never got to. I guess this is kind of like that, in a way.”

“I guess it is,” Damien said softly, covering Sylph’s hand with his own. “But, either way, I can’t deal with it now. There’s nothing I can do to make the situation better, and neither can Henry. I don’t know how Hilla would react to finding out the truth, but we can’t afford to lose an instructor right now.”

Faint footfalls padded over to the outside of their tent.

“Damien?” Hilla asked from outside. “Can we talk?”

Damien’s eyes widened and he shot a panicked look at Sylph. There was no realistic way he’d be able to hold up his lie through any level of real questioning, and Hilla didn’t strike him as the type of woman to half-ass things.

He opened his mouth to give an excuse, but Sylph pressed a finger to his lips. She pushed him down to the sleeping bag and rolled it over him.

She rustled her hair and adjusted her shirt before pulling the tent flap open just enough to peek out.

“Yes, Mrs. Vale?”

“I— Oh! Oh. Sorry,” Hilla said, quickly shuffling away. “Bad time. Sorry.”

Sylph let the flap fall and turned back to Damien, giving him a smug grin as he sat up. Damien just shook his head in disbelief.

“If I wasn’t missing my memories, I think that probably would have embarrassed me quite a bit. Guess I’m not the only one lying to her.”

“Who said anything about lying?” Sylph asked, sliding into the sleeping bag beside Damien and pulling him into her arms. “I’ll have you know I’m a very honest person.”

“Guess I can’t be the one to make you a liar,” Damien said, returning her smile and pulling the bag over their heads.

That night was far less enjoyable for Henry than it was for them, as there was a very distinct lack of goats to torment in the immediate area. But, just that once, he let things slide. The goat fee could always be paid later—and with interest.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-ONE

Days ground by. Under the tutelage of all the professors, the small teams improved at a rapid rate. While their progress was fantastic, Damien's attempts to avoid Hilla were becoming more and more strained.

A blind man could have seen the tension building in the camp, but nobody dared broach the subject. And so, the training continued. Damien and Sylph spent all the time either sparring each other or one of the professors.

Sylph did her best to keep Hilla's attention away from Damien whenever there was a free moment, but it was clear that Hilla wasn't buying it. She was polite enough to avoid pushing too hard, but there was only so long that would last, and they all knew it.

On the morning of the sixth day of training, Damien awoke long before the sun rose. He sat inside the tent, peering out through the thin flap into the dark camp. Sylph slipped up beside him.

"I'm not sure how much longer we can keep this up," she said in a low voice. "Your mom isn't going to let things slide forever."

"I know." Damien's hands clenched. "But what am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I'm the right person to offer advice there. I'll just help you do whatever you feel is best, even if it might not be the optimal solution."

Damien gave her a small smile. "Thanks. At least there are only a few more days of this left. We can get away once we go to take care of the Corruption Seed."

"Again, I'm not the right person, but I'm not sure it's healthy to be looking forward to fighting a conglomeration of suffering human souls."

Sylph put her hands on Damien's shoulders. "Just don't do anything stupid."

"I'm probably already doing something stupid, but I have no plans of letting myself get killed. We can't afford to let that happen until the Corruption and the Void are both dealt with. Especially considering it's partially my fault that things have gotten this bad."

"Come on," Henry said, slipping out of Damien's shadow. "You can't blame yourself for that. I wouldn't have ever existed if you'd failed to force Herald into a deal. Wouldn't that have been a tragedy?"

Damien snorted. "Yeah. I suppose it would have been. I don't suppose you've got any advice for me and what I should do about Hil—ah, my mom?"

"The memories are gone," Henry replied, his grin fading. "There's nothing to be recovered, Damien. The boy Hilla knew is dead. The Faceless killed him. Either leave things as they are or make new memories. I'm looking to try out a few last things, but I wouldn't hold out hope."

"That's dark. So, you think I should just tell her the truth? That I don't remember her at all?"

"Maybe someday," Henry said. "Given what I know of her, she'll take the news very poorly. It might impact her ability to fight the Corruption. It would be better to find a way to placate her until the fighting is over. Sylph is right about you not being able to keep this secret running forever, though."

Damien grunted. "We'll see."

---

It Who Shatters the Earth was dead. Its corpse laid on the cold stone, blood pooling around the body it had taken. Limbs jutted out at odd angles and an enormous chunk of its chest was missing.

Moon stood above it, his hand clenched around the creature's slowly stilling heart. Chains of Void magic twisted around it, constricting the fleshy organ and squeezing it into a small pinprick.

He stepped over the Void creature, his black cloak rippling behind him as he walked deeper into the earth. His senses brushed across another

Voidling and Moon's lips pressed thin. He shimmered, reappearing dozens of meters below in a cavern.

It Who Burns the Sky stood, his arms crossed behind his back, awaiting his arrival. The tall, lanky man had sharp eyebrows and smoldering red eyes. The Void creature had certainly taken care of its body. If Moon didn't know better, he would have suspected that it actually enjoyed its mortal form.

"Moon," Sky said. "We thought you dead."

"I do not die so easily. Sun protects me, even in death."

"Sun would do no such thing if he knew of what you have become. You have sided with the Corruption. Your actions threaten to doom the Mortal Plane. Have you truly lost all traces of what wisdom you once had?"

Moon's hands tightened and his lips trembled in fury. "Do not sully Sun's name with your vile lips, Voidling. He gave his life to ensure I could carry on our mission, and I plan to do it. There are precious few Void creatures who understand their true purpose. You are all worse off for his loss."

"He was incomplete. He failed to complete his purpose. It Who Swallows the Sun should never have existed. The Faceless should have removed it as soon as its emotions were discovered. The Void must be impartial. It must be absolute. These failures are why the Corruption was allowed to take root in this Cycle."

"The Corruption that *you* created," Moon replied. "Second is mad, but he is not a fool. The Cycle is flawed. Your inability to recognize that simply proves you are not worthy to guard the Cycle."

"And you believe yourself to be the solution? You? A flawed, broken mortal who death trails like a trained dog? You have no soul, Moon. You are nothing but a hollow shell that seeks the destruction of the Eight Planes."

"Me? No. I am not the solution," Moon said with a dry laugh. He pulled his cloak back, revealing a sickly green scar stretching across his chest. It slowly crept across his body, digging itself deeper into him. "I will not even be around to see this Cycle end. Sun's last gift gave me little, but it is more than enough to ensure those that come after me will end this travesty once and for all."

"You are delusional." Fire flickered around Sky's arms, twisting up his body and forming into two large swords in his hands. "I will end you in the

name of the Faceless. Coming here wounded was the last mistake you will make.”

“You will die, just like all those that came before you. After you, there is only one more task left to me. I will pave the way, Voidling.” Moon’s tattoos lit all across his body. Void magic shook the air around him, churning through his body with such intensity that the stone beneath his feet trembled. “Allow me to guide you into the great beyond.”

---

Every second was agony. Each individual fiber of Second’s being screamed. His body longed to fray apart and give into oblivion. More than almost anything else, he longed to pass into oblivion.

Almost anything.

More than the pain that suffused his being. More than the molten acid that pumped through his artificial veins. More than the exhaustion of the abuse he put his mental energy through to keep his body together with Ether. More than anything else, Second would not allow himself to rest until the Cycle was gone.

The voices of millions of suffering souls called to him. They wailed in endless agony from what the Void had done to them. What the Void would do to them, as soon as he faltered for even an instant.

Second drew a slow breath and forced it back out of his lips. The motion was entirely unnecessary. This body had no need for oxygen. It needed nothing but Ether. Yet, somehow, breathing managed to help him keep his connection to the Mortal Plane.

He didn’t have to hold on much longer. Even with the heavy losses his Corruption Seeds had suffered, they had spread throughout the Mortal Plane. Their numbers grew with every passing day, and the meager opposition the mortals put up did little to slow him.

They would thank him, once they discovered the alternative. Death now was vastly preferable to an eternity in the cracks of the universe. Once the Planes were one, there would be no more suffering.

Second flickered through the streams of information flooding into him from the Corruption spread across the plane. The Voidlings had yet to make their move, and Second needed to know why.

The chances of them partnering with Damien and It Who Heralds the End of all Light were unfathomably low, but Second wasn't willing to take any risks. The boy had to die before he could properly deal with the Faceless' dogs.

Damien was growing at a disturbing rate. Second could afford him no more time. He needed to bring his full force to bear. It was time to gather the Corruption. If Damien had been anyone else, Second might have been concerned about forcing them to fight.

But before bringing the full forces of the Corruption to bear, there was one small step left. An artifact that had been stolen from his grasp—one that currently rested in the halls of Blacksmith, without anyone to properly defend it.

A sickly green portal stretched open beside Second, and he stepped through it without a second glance. There were only a few presences within the Mortal Plane whose power he had any degree of respect for, and none of them were currently in his way.

Second emerged from the portal, arriving in a fancy room that looked like it hadn't been properly used in years. It hardly surprised him. Blacksmith's dean was never actually present at the school, and the acting dean couldn't have cared less about it.

If anything, Second was mildly annoyed that he knew anything at all about the school. It was hardly relevant to him. He'd seen so many variations of magic colleges rise and fall through the Cycles that the fact he'd learned enough about this particular one to even know of the dean's existence was infuriating.

His eyes scanned the desk, and he walked around to its other side to start rifling through its drawers.

*Damien is a damned fool, but he's a powerful one. It's unfortunate that he didn't bother keeping the necklace on him, though. I can't blame him. He's just one mortal, and he trusts others far too much.*

*I did, too, at one point.*

A Rune Circle hidden well in the bottom of one of the drawers caught Second's eye. It was a powerful one, enough to rip most people to shreds the moment they triggered it.

Second wasn't most people. A grin pulled at the corner of his lips, and he reached down, running a finger along it. Green acid dripped from his fingertip, melting through the magic before it could even activate.

Second peeled the panel of wood back, revealing a necklace coiled up in the bottom of the drawer. He reached down, picking the necklace up and rising to his feet.

This wasn't everything he needed. It was just the next step, but he hadn't waged this war for millennia without knowing how to take things one step at a time. Now that he had the necklace, he needed to remove his next obstruction.

Damien.

Luckily, Second knew Damien. He knew him well. He knew that Damien wouldn't abandon his fellow mortals to their fates. That was his nature. A tiny flicker of a grin passed over Second's face before it vanished once more. That was his nature too. Damien would understand, if his soul survived the compression of the Eight Planes.

Second sent a command out to every single Corrupted creature on the Mortal Plane. If the Void wouldn't make the next move, then he would. It was time to start the final war of the Mortal Plane.

And once it was over, Damien Vale would be dead. The rest of the Void would fall before his uncontested might, and then he could finally rest. He couldn't afford to let any other future come to pass.

Second stepped back through the portal, and it closed behind him.

The mortals needed him, even if they didn't realize it yet.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-TWO

Henry's words, as they often did, turned out to be correct. Damien's extended game of hide and seek with Hilla ended that night, when he returned from practicing with Sylph to find that his tent was missing.

It wasn't hard to spot—it had been moved to the edge of the camp, and Hilla stood beside it, her arms crossed. Damien exchanged a glance with Sylph.

"I don't suppose we'll be able to get away with using your tent instead of mine now?"

"If you do that, I'm pretty sure she'll drag you out of the clearing kicking and screaming," Sylph said. "I don't think Hilla is going to let the matter lie any longer. Either we run or you talk to her."

Damien rubbed his forehead. He let his hands drop and heaved a sigh. "Talk it is. I was really hoping that she'd just kind of ignore everything."

"You really don't know her very well."

"You don't say," Damien said, even as Sylph winced as she realized what she'd said.

"Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's fine. You're not wrong. Let's go talk to her, I guess."

"Should I really come with you for this?" Sylph asked. "It's probably something that you should just be talking about between the two of you."

"You do anything I do," Damien replied. "As long as you want to, that is. Also, at this point, you know her better than I do. So does Henry, for that matter, but I don't want to rely solely on his advice for anything with a relationship."

“Hey!” Henry protested from Damien’s shadow. “That was uncalled for and quite rude.”

“Was I wrong?”

“Not in the slightest. Carry on.”

Sylph shook her head. “Okay, I’ll come. Are you going to tell her everything?”

“Not if I can avoid it. I’ll just say as little as possible while taking care of whatever she’s worried about. We’ve already discussed what would happen if I said everything,” Damien said as he and Sylph set off toward the displaced tent.

Sylph sent him a worried glance, but she elected not to say anything else. Hilla stood with her arms crossed beside the tent, watching them approach quietly until they stood across from each other. Several uncomfortable seconds ticked by.

“Well?” Hilla asked. “Talk, Damien. You’ve been avoiding me. What’s going on? Seriously. What’s gotten into you? Did something happen with your father?”

Damien snorted. He was tempted to blame everything on Derrod, but he suppressed the idea. There was no point making things even tougher for Hilla than they already were. “It doesn’t have anything to do with him, no.”

“Then, what is it?” Hilla demanded. “Why won’t you speak to me until I do something like this? How come Delph winces every single time he catches me looking in your direction? Give me answers, Damien. Do you hate me?”

“What? No! Why would I hate you?”

*I don’t even remember who you are.*

“Any mother would think the same if their child refused to speak to them after being away for a year,” Hilla snapped.

“I don’t hate you.”

“Then, what is it? Tell me!” Hilla stepped forward, grabbing Damien by the shoulders. Ether leapt to his palms instinctively, but he forced it away.

“I was trying to protect you!”

“Protect me? I’m a grown woman and a battle mage,” Hilla said, aghast. “I’m your *mother*. It’s my job to protect *you*. And I already know about the Corruption. What could you possibly be protecting me from?”

“Me,” Damien replied, shrugging her hands off his shoulders. “The memory loss might have been a little more extensive than I let on.”

Hilla's mouth worked as her eyes darted around Damien's face in confusion. Faint realization started to set in, but she set her jaw in denial. "Extensive? How extensive?"

"I don't remember a lot of things."

"How much, Damien?" Hilla asked, raising her voice. "Do you even know who I am?"

Damien's throat clenched. He wasn't sure why, but his stomach was tying itself into knots and every fiber of his body—except for his mind—felt like this was the last woman in the world that he should be upsetting.

*Just lie. Henry and Sylph can help pass everything off. I can't tell her everything.*

"No," Damien said softly, the word slipping between his lips before he could stop himself.

*Shit.*

Hilla took a step back as if struck. Horror washed over her features. She swallowed shakily. "Nothing? You don't remember me at all?"

"I lost a lot of my childhood. I've got some powerful people looking into seeing how to fix it."

A tear welled in Hilla's eye, and she quickly blinked it away. "If it was something they could fix, you would have told me that from the start, wouldn't you? Seven Planes. You don't know who I am anymore. I—"

She abruptly stopped speaking and drew in a trembling breath, letting it out slowly. Hilla nodded once and pressed her lips together tightly.

"You're still my son. I don't care if you can't remember right now. *I* remember. Nothing has changed. You don't have to avoid me."

"I just didn't want you to feel hurt, especially with the war coming up. Distractions are dangerous."

Hilla shook her head sadly. "It's a mother's duty to protect her son not the other way around. I am an experienced mage from the frontlines, Damien. I may have retired, but I'm more than capable of separating my personal life from war. You really did forget me. The Damien I knew would have told me immediately. We trusted each other."

Damien winced. "I'm sorry."

*Can't trust somebody I don't know.*

"Don't apologize. It wasn't your fault you lost your memories. Is there any chance of recovering them? Any chance at all?"

“I— Yeah. There is,” Damien said. “Someone I trust with my life is working on it. If anyone can bring them back, he can.”

Hilla squinted at Damien for several seconds before giving him a small nod. “Okay. If you say so, I’ll believe you. And, if they can’t come back, we’ll just build new memories. Sylph knows who I am, right?”

“I do,” Sylph confirmed. “As does Damien’s companion. He isn’t in any doubt that you’re his mother.”

Hilla gave them a weak smile. “See? That’s progress. We can rebuild what was lost, but not if you don’t let me help share the burden.”

Words didn’t want to come from Damien’s lips, so he settled for giving her a small nod. Hilla’s hands twitched at her side, and several seconds of awkward silence passed. Finally, she cleared her throat and nodded again.

“Okay. We’ll start over, until you can get your memories back. I’m Hilla Vale, your mother.”

Despite himself, Damien couldn’t keep a small snort of laughter from slipping out. “I think we’ve already established that much.”

Hilla looked hurt, but it wasn’t long before she started to laugh as well. Sylph stared at them, baffled, as the two started to laugh even harder. It was nearly a minute before either of them managed to gather enough breath to talk again.

“Well, if there was any doubt about you being related, it’s been dealt with,” Sylph said.

Hilla pushed the hair out of her face and gave Sylph a small smile. “Thank you. Damien didn’t forget you, did he?”

Sylph glanced to the side. “No. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Hilla snapped. “Especially not you. He was always a bit reserved. He needs someone to rely on, especially if I can’t be that person for him right now. I was so thrilled when you came to visit us. You know, when he was younger, he could never keep a relationship with a girl for more than—”

“Hey now, we don’t really need to go there,” Damien interjected. “I remember. I had things I was dealing with back then.”

“You remember that?”

“I— The memories I lost were important,” Damien said. “And only the important ones. I remember the unimportant stuff.”

“I see. I’m not sure if I should feel better or worse about that, but I’ll spare you the retellings, then. Even with the threat of the Corruption, we

should have time to catch you up on your memories in between everything.”

“I suppose so. There should be some time in between preparing for Delph’s demonstration in the ranking battles and practicing for fighting against the Corruption,” Damien allowed. “Especially with how slowly it has been moving. Maybe you’re right. I should have told you about this earlier, but we can catch up now.”

Hilla smiled. “We can. The best thing anyone can ever do is try their best. I’ll always be your mother, Damien. And, if you can’t remember that, I’ll just have to remind you.”

The tightness in Damien’s chest started to release. Of all the ways that could have gone, he hadn’t expected Hilla to take it so well. The woman clearly cared about him. That only made the throbbing ache that had been building in his heart grow even stronger. How much had he paid to control the Void? Just how much had the Faceless taken from him?

“Now’s as good a time to start as any,” Hilla suggested. “Especially since I’ve gone and made a scene. Perhaps we could have dinner together?”

“I think I’d like that,” Damien said. He turned, preparing to head back down to camp and get some food before the others took everything.

A loud thrum filled the air as a brilliant purple portal snapped open in the center of the camp. Whisp strode out from it, black smoke curling off her gauntleted fists and her clothes tattered.

“The Corruption is moving.” Whisp’s words echoed through the camp like a funeral dirge. “There are several thousand Corrupted monsters assaulting the frontlines, and hundreds have appeared around the Mage Colleges. Blackmist has repelled the first wave, but you must all return immediately. It is no longer safe in the wild. Bastards also stole the artifact we got from the Crypt. I don’t know how they got past my defenses, but they’re using it to control the monster horde.”

A second of stunned silence followed her words, followed by the loud cacophony of everyone trying to yell over each other to ask Whisp questions. She narrowed her eyes and clapped her hands together with a loud crash that echoed through the camp, cutting them all off.

“Shut up. The situation will be explained later. Dredd, open a portal and get everyone back onto school grounds right now. The Corruption is targeting mages and going after any stragglers. Also, we need you and Delph at Blackmist.”

Damien's hand shot out, and he called on the Void, grabbing his staff as grayscale covered the world. He extended his other hand, tracing broken runes through the air as he cast the spell he'd been practicing for the past week.

His bones rattled as the energy twisted around him, extending a feeler in search of the Corruption Seed. His senses followed after it, leaving his body behind as he sent his mind into the Void.

He followed it into a long, plain stretch of completely flat stone within the Void. Sitting in the center of it, its skin pale alabaster white, was a towering monster. It was gaunt, with burning green eyes and thin ribbons of stone covering portions of its body where it had yet to recover from wounds.

Damien's consciousness snapped back into his body, and he released his staff, letting the Void recede.

"The Seed is still in the V—in hiding—but who knows how long it will be until Second gets it out. We need to kill it."

Whisp turned her gaze to Damien. "There are thousands of people gathered at Blackmist who need protection from the Corruption. We can't play the aggressors. These aren't weak Corrupted monsters sieging us. They're powerful, stronger than almost all the other ones we've fought."

"The professors can't," Damien corrected. "I can. If the Seed blooms, we're going to have a much bigger problem on our hands."

Whisp gave him a curt nod. "Do what you think is best, but we need you alive. We need everyone here alive. We don't have the bodies to spare."

"Hold on," Delph said, stepping forward. "Dredd and I can go with Damien to deal with the monster. It shouldn't take long. We've been preparing for it this whole time."

"I can't risk losing all of you," Whisp growled. "The school is going to fall, Delph. I don't have time for this. Not to mention where the Seed is. Have you forgotten what happens when you go *there*? Unless he can get it out, how are you going to help? You'll run out of Ether and become useless."

"Sylph and I can handle it," Damien said. "Time is of the essence. You said it yourself, Whisp. Just have someone watching this area so we can get picked up once the Seed is dealt with."

Whisp narrowed her eyes, then gave him a curt nod. "Right. Don't die."

“Wait, wait. Stop,” Hilla said. “Damien, you and Sylph are going to fight the Corruption Seed alone? The last one nearly beat Delph and Dredd combined. You can’t go.”

“We need to. This is my fight, more than you could realize,” Damien said. “The Seed needs to be stopped. We should have handled it earlier, but I guess we all got lax and thought it would wait around forever.”

“But—”

“This is bigger than us,” Damien said. “We’ll be back. I promise. And don’t offer to come with us. Whisp is right. You can’t rely on your Ether in the Void.”

“That’s all you have, too!”

“No,” Damien said, shaking his head, “it isn’t. I’ll tell you what, Hilla. You tell me about my past when I get back. In exchange, I’ll tell you about what’s happened since.”

Hilla swallowed, her eyes boring deep into Damien’s. Then, she gave him a small nod. “Mom.”

“What?”

“You call me mom. Not Hilla.”

“When I get back,” Damien promised. “It feels more poignant that way.”

“That’s settled, then,” Whisp said. She snapped her metal clad fingers. “Dredd, now. We’re unprotected here. Get the portal open.”

Dredd glanced at Damien, then inclined his head slightly. Delph growled and stormed over to join them, pulling a small pouch from his waist and pushing it into Damien’s hands. Damien blinked in surprise and started to open it, but Delph grabbed his hands and held it shut.

“Not until you’re in the Void,” he whispered.

Damien cocked his head to the side, and Delph flicked his eyes in Whisp’s direction. Damien shrugged and tucked the pouch into his waistband.

“Let’s go save the shitty little school,” Delph growled, striding back to Whisp.

Damien glanced at Sylph. “Well, this wasn’t how I saw today going, but are you ready? If you don’t want to—”

Sylph gave him a curt nod. “You aren’t going into the Void alone again. We do this together. I’m ready.”

Damien nodded and reached back out to the Void. It seeped back into him as his palm closed around his staff. Broken runes gathered in the air, visible only to him. Henry aided his motions as he drew on the terrifying magic.

The runes snapped together, and a black disk sprung open noiselessly before them. Damien and Sylph stepped into it, and the world vanished, consumed by the Void.

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## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-THREE

The Void was cold. Its freezing chill dug into Damien's skin like the claws of a harpy as he and Sylph formed upon the dry grass of a bleak field. Worse than the pain was the feeling of belonging that suffused Damien as soon as the Void took form around them. Sylph's hand tightened around Damien's.

“Are you okay?” Damien asked, tearing himself away from his thoughts. “Is the lack of Ether too much?”

“No. I can deal with it,” Sylph said, shaking her head. “It’s just...wrong. Do you know what I mean?”

Damien was silent. He had—at one point. Now, the Void’s cold grasp just felt natural. The dull gray hues that covered the land around them and the dead grass prickling against their feet felt like home.

“It’s fake,” Damien said, following Sylph’s gaze to the grass. “The Void creatures made it, I think. Nothing here is the same as it was on Earth. Just us, and that’s not really saying much at all.”

“Couldn’t they have tried to make it look a little more welcoming?”

“I think that would require enough creativity to appreciate art. The Void is sorely lacking in that.”

Sylph flexed her hands and shifted from foot to foot in an attempt to get the blood flowing in her body. “The faster we deal with the Seed, the better. Do you know where it is?”

Damien nodded. Even as he raised his hand to reach for his staff, he found it already in his hand. Cold energy crackled against his palm, bucking in its eagerness to be used. It was easier to access here than it had been on the Mortal Plane. Much easier.

The broken runes sprung to his fingertips, nearly of their own volition. They rotated around him in the air as he finished drawing the circles, then shattered into thousands of pieces as the spell released. A slender black line blinked into existence in the air before them, trailing off into the field. It hung in the air like a strand of limp yarn, just barely held up on either end.

“It’s close,” Damien said. “I don’t know what the Seed can do. Be careful.”

“I’ve been training for longer than you have, and I can take quite a few more blows than you,” Sylph said with a wry smile as they set off, following the line. “I should be the one telling you that.”

Damien’s shadow lengthened and Henry rose up behind him, already in his Full Manifestation. Sylph missed a step but easily made up for it.

“I thought we were under attack,” Sylph muttered. “That form is terrifying.”

“Thank you,” Henry said. “I worked very hard on it. It’s very important to crush the life out of the Corruption with style.”

Damien just grunted. The Void prickled against his skin like he was covered in ants, but the feeling stopped the instant he turned his attention toward it. He tightened his grip around the staff. As they continued through the seemingly endless field, the black line leading them started to grow tauter.

“We’re getting closer,” Damien said, running a finger along the spell. Tiny tingles of Void magic arced off where he touched it. “Be ready to fight at a moment’s notice. The Seed might be hiding.”

Sylph nodded and her scythes slid free of her back. Her eyes swept over the clearing as they walked, searching for the smallest signs of movement.

There was nothing. The Void looked hauntingly silent. The fields of endless dead grass stretched beyond where the eye could see, perfectly uniform and unchanging. Air hung dead still, even though the prickling cold felt like a sharp wind.

Damien took the still moment to open the bag Delph had given him. He undid the bindings and reached into it, pulling out a leatherbound book. Vague memories stirred in his head, and he flipped the book open, leafing through it.

Every single page was blank, save for one. It depicted a brutal looking black axe, currents of black energy running around its head like a miniature storm.

“The axe Delph used against Second,” Damien muttered. “Would you look at that. Sylph, how good are you with an axe?”

“Not very,” Sylph replied. “I’ve got some practice with them, but I prefer weapons that I can amplify with my speed. Axes are unwieldy.”

“What about you, Henry?”

“Probably better than you.”

“Agreed on that,” Damien said. He tossed the book to Henry, who caught it with two razor-sharp fingers. Somehow, that didn’t cut the book into dozens of tiny little shreds. “Second was pretty scared of the axe in that. Do you know how to pull it out?”

Henry scoffed. “It’s just an artifact, even if it’s a strong one. Do you really think I wouldn’t know how to use it? It’s better to leave it sheathed for now, though. Weapons like this don’t like being drawn if you don’t use them.”

“They’ve got personalities?” Sylph asked. “Mine didn’t.”

“The strong ones do,” Henry replied. “Artifacts aren’t forged from nothing. Most of them are made from the body of a powerful monster—or human, in some cases. I’ll happily spend some time looking into what this one is made from once we deal with our target.”

They fell silent once more. With every step they took following the thread, it grew tauter until it was a perfectly straight line. It came to a stop above a patch of the field that looked nearly identical to every other part of it, except for two bunches of grass that were flattened. The grass around the flat spots flared outward, as if something was pushing it back. If the line hadn’t been running right through the area, Damien would have completely missed it.

Sylph blurred, launching toward the displaced grass. A loud *bang* split the dead silence, and she was launched backward, slamming into the grass and rolling several feet before springing back to her feet.

Gaunt gray limbs bloomed from nothingness. A long, slow wheeze rustled through the clearing as the Seed slowly shifted into vision. The monster’s emaciated form towered over Damien, the skin on its face—if it could even be called that—stretched tight around the open orifices that marked its eyes and mouth.

Damien thrust his staff forward, sending a Void-powered gravity lance into the monster’s chest. The magic surged, moving so eagerly that he had

to restrict himself. They needed the Seed dead but letting that much Void magic into his body seemed like a very poor idea.

It let out a whistling wail, staggering back as the spell burned through its body and shot out the back, leaving a dripping green hole behind.

As quickly as the wound had formed, it started to seal shut. Damien's eyes widened and he Warp Stepped back. An instant later, a huge, deformed hand slammed into the ground, crushing the grass and ripping apart false dirt.

Damien extended his senses, searching for the Seed's connection to whatever it was using to heal itself. To his bafflement, he found nothing. The wound sealed itself shut and another low wheeze rattled the tall creature's body.

Sylph flashed toward it, her scythes carving across the monster's chest as her wind armor increased her speed even further. She moved so quickly that Damien couldn't even follow her, but cuts bloomed like flowers across the monster's body.

Each one sealed itself shut an instant after Sylph's blade created it. It whipped a hand through the air and Sylph threw herself back, vaulting to avoid a grab and sliding to a stop beside Damien.

"It's not connected to the Ether. How is it healing?" Damien asked.

"It isn't? I feel a connection."

"Allow me," Henry said. He reached into the book, his long hand sinking into its pages. He drew it forth, pulling the wicked black axe free from within it. Henry's face split apart in a deadly grin, and his wings snapped open.

He launched himself forward, bringing the weapon hurtling toward the Seed. It lurched away, raising a hand defensively. A disk of green light bloomed between it and Henry, and the axe rebounded off it with a resounding clang.

"It can use magic?" Damien asked, aghast. He leveled his staff and formed a Void-enhanced gravity sphere. A massive black sphere spiraled outward beside the Seed, broken runes encircling it like halos.

It detonated with a silent hiss, taking the bottom half of the monster and a huge chunk of the ground along with it. Even as the Seed fell, its ravaged torso and limbs regrew at an incredible rate, reforming completely before it could even hit the ground.

The Seed raised a hand. Each of its fingers was the wrong length, as if they'd been taken from different monsters and stitched together. A sphere of green light gathered at its palm, pulsating with sickly energy.

Henry flashed forward, raining blows down upon the Corrupted monster with the axe. Every time, just before the weapon connected, a flickering shield appeared to block the strike.

"This isn't possible," Damien said. "Sylph, what do you see? What's its connection?"

"Corruption. It's drawing energy from more Corruption!"

"How is that possible?"

A loud wail split the clearing as one of Henry's attacks broke through the monster's defenses and scored across its chest. It staggered back, forcing Henry back with a blast of energy. The thin cut wasn't serious, but it didn't seal over.

The Seed's face trembled, and its head jerked from side to side unnaturally. Then, slowly, it turned to look straight at Damien. The hole that made up its mouth twisted and warped, growing thinner and pressing itself together.

"Damien Vale," it whispered in a whistling voice. "We see you."

**"Shatter."**

Black lines erupted from Damien's staff, binding around the Seed. They detonated, splitting the air with a rending screech. The Seed's body segmented, falling apart into tiny chunks.

Sylph darted forward, but a blast of Corruption magic forced her back as the pieces stitched themselves back together in record time. The Seed took a stumbling step toward them. Damien fired another blast of Void magic into it, but the wound sealed over just as quickly. Even the blow dealt by Delph's axe had sealed itself.

"It's draining other Corruption to heal itself," Sylph said urgently.

"How many?" Damien asked as they backpedaled. He blasted it with spell after spell while Henry rained blows down on it, flitting around the monster. Flashes of green light continued to obstruct him while it completely ignored Damien's magic.

"I'm not sure," Sylph muttered. "There are only a few lines, but they're *huge*. I-I think it might be all of them. I can't tap into the energy either. I don't know what it would do to me."

"Henry?" Damien yelled. "Thoughts?"

“I can cut the connection,” Henry called back as he brought the axe down toward the Corruption’s head. It struck a green shield with a loud *crash*, failing to penetrate once more. “But you’re going to need to weaken it. The less power I use in the Void, the better. My energy is known to the other Void Creatures, but yours isn’t.”

“If you haven’t noticed, Sylph and I aren’t having any luck damaging the stupid thing.”

The monster lashed out, catching Henry in the chest and slamming him into the ground. He sank into the shadows, coming out beside Damien and Sylph.

“You need to use more Void in your attacks,” Henry said. “You’re barely touching on it. We’re in the Void, Damien. Use it. That’s what all of the training was for. I can feel this stupid thing pulling in more energy. We need to deal with it before it blooms.”

Damien grimaced. He drew in a deep breath, trying to connect to the Void around them. The Seed howled and flashed toward him. Sylph shot to stand before Damien. The scythes sprouting from her back doubled in size and whipped upward, blocking the strike before it could hit him.

She groaned, her body arching in pain. Jagged blades pushed out from her elbows, and green acid dripped down her back from where the scythes connected to her skin. Her scythes whipped to the side, throwing the Seed’s hand back.

“I’ll help Henry keep it off you until you can hold it down,” Sylph said, a grating note to her voice.

“We know you,” the Seed mourned, taking a lurching step toward him. Henry fired a blast of violent purple energy into its chest, sending it skidding back. He launched himself at it, bringing the axe in for another blow, but it was blocked by the green shield once more. “We have already become. Why must you make us suffer?”

Damien extended his senses, reaching for the Void around them. It flooded to his fingertips, but he didn’t stop drawing on it. His eyes involuntarily shut, and the sounds of Sylph and Henry’s fight grew dimmer as the roar of the Void filled his ears.

The prickling energy that had been dancing across his skin ever since he’d returned to the Void turned to a dull ache, and that turned to a piercing pain. Damien went to release his pull on the Void, but it refused. The cold energy was moving too quickly now, and it poured into his body like the

ocean rushing to fill a bucket. His attempts to block it off were crushed and washed away.

A loud roar echoed through the Void, reaching his ears even through the churning energy filling him. Damien snarled, straining to regain control of his body. The Void thundered within him, resisting his will stubbornly. Something crashed into the ground beside Damien, shaking it violently.

“You. Will. **Obey.**”

Damien’s eyes snapped open. Void magic erupted around him in a cyclone, dissipating into the air as he yanked his body forcibly under control. The searing covering his skin vanished as the tattoos that he’d drawn with Moon’s ink revealed themselves, crawling across his body.

Sylph stood before Damien, green acid dripping from several massive wounds in her body as they struggled to heal themselves. The ground around him was torn to shreds, but it was still largely unharmed.

Henry didn’t look injured either, but Sylph only had a limited amount of power to use in the Void. Without the ability to drain the Corruption safely, she could only rely on her innate speed and the small amount of Ether she’d brought with her in her core.

The Seed’s head snapped toward Damien, completely ignoring Sylph as her scythes carved a massive *X* into its chest. The monster’s mouth opened in a loud wail, and its face cracked like an egg.

“Moon,” it wheezed, lurching and stumbling toward him.

“My name,” Damien growled, Void energy crackling around his staff, “is Damien Vale. **Obliterate.**”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A bolt of Void-laden lightning shattered the air and slammed into the Seed, ripping into its body and sending energy coursing throughout it. The Seed wailed in pain. Its body bulged unnaturally, like it was boiling beneath its skin.

“It’s forcibly drawing in more energy. I don’t think so,” Henry growled. He planted the axe in the ground and extended his hands. “Forget keeping my energy concealed.”

Void thundered through the air, warping around Henry. Dozens of eyes materialized around the monster, snapping open and firing beams of vibrant purple energy into its bubbling body.

Seams carved across the monster as its skin split apart. Lashing green tendrils erupted from within it, writhing around on the ground. Henry’s hands glowed with energy as he pulled more and more Void through himself.

Damien could feel it rushing through his body and into Henry, but he’d drawn so much of the power into himself that he could barely feel his reserves dropping. Thick chains of heavy black metal materialized around the Seed, binding its body and struggling to contain the lashing monster.

The chains pulled it downward, snapping its legs like brittle twigs and forcing the creature to the ground.

Sylph grabbed the axe and pulled it from the ground as Henry’s eyes narrowed, increasing the intensity of the beams burning into the Seed. Hissing purple magic arced off his body, crackling in the air around him.

The Seed screeched as Sylph raised the axe. A green shield erupted around its entire body, trying to fend off their collective attacks.

“**Shatter**,” Damien commanded.

The Corrupted magic smashed into pieces as an invisible force slammed into it, washing it away in a flood of Void. The Seed thrashed, shattering several of the chains and lurching upward—right as Sylph brought the axe crashing down into its chest.

A sickening *crunch* echoed through the clearing as the weapon slammed home, digging deep into the beast's center. It wailed one last time with enough force to throw Sylph back into Damien, leaving the axe lodged in its chest.

Its hollow eyes locked on Damien's for an instant. A flicker of green energy flashed beneath them. Then, it collapsed back, the chains rattling as they grew thicker and bound it even further.

Henry stepped forward, grabbing the hilt of the axe and pushing it deeper. With a final, grinding *crack*, the Seed fell limp. The chains slithered back into the ground and acid burbled up from the huge wound around the axe.

Its head lolling to the side, the Seed's body melted away. The axe thumped to the dirt, and Henry quickly grabbed it before the growing puddle of acid could envelop it entirely. Silence fell over the clearing once more, broken only by Damien and Sylph's heavy breathing.

“What in the Eight Planes was that?” Damien asked. Void energy still permeated his body and sizzled in his tattoos, but he ignored it. “The Corruption can draw that much power from each other? Even when they’re this far apart?”

“So, it seems. That was...not good,” Henry said. “It nearly bloomed before we killed it. That could have been very bad.”

“Didn’t it seem a little too easy at the end?” Sylph asked. “I was kind of expecting more. Not that I’m complaining, of course.”

“Damien and I were both using a lot of Void magic, and this is our home ground,” Henry replied. “I’d expect the Corruption to be crushed beneath that, especially since it was still a Seed. That said, it really did seem like Damien blew its defenses apart at the end. It was able to keep me at bay. Why did a single spell from him take it out?”

“That’s a good question,” Damien said, squinting at the puddle of acid as it sank into the dirt. “Maybe it ran out of energy to draw on?”

“Possible. I was restricting its access to the rest of the Corruption, but it wasn’t completely severed. Either way, we should figure this out elsewhere. The other Void creatures in the area are absolutely going to be drawn here

by the amount of power Damien and I just used. The last thing we need is to fight against them while everyone else is handling the Corruption.”

Damien nodded. His staff warmed slightly as his thoughts turned to forming a portal back to the Mortal Plane. A new spell provided itself to him, the broken runes materializing in the air without his request.

“Damien?” Sylph asked. “Are you making a portal back?”

“I— They just appeared,” Damien said with a frown. “You can see them? I thought I was hallucinating.”

“They’re there,” Henry said, his many eyes squinting at the rune circle. “It’s a portal spell—a long range one, not just a path back to the Mortal Plane. When’d you learn that?”

“Just now, apparently,” Damien said.

The grass beneath their feet rippled, and a distant presence tickled the back of Damien’s mind. He exchanged a glance with Henry.

“They’re coming,” Henry said. “The spell looks fine. Use it.”

Damien extended his hand, and the runes shifted closer to him. His fingers touched them, and a small spark of Void energy leapt from within him and into them. Wind rushed past him as a gray and black portal twisted open before them.

“Go, quickly,” Henry said, shooting back into Damien’s shadow. Sylph grabbed the axe before it could fall, and she and Damien stepped into the waiting portal. As soon as Damien entered it, he released his grip on the staff, not wanting to maintain his connection to the Void any longer than he needed to.

Cold energy rippled around them as they pierced through the Planes. Light bloomed, and the two stumbled as they were deposited on the cobbled gray stone of Blackmist’s streets. Damien turned his eyes up, the wave of nausea passing so quickly that it might as well have never even been there. His vision remained in grayscale for several seconds before color finally found its way back.

The streets were empty, but Damien heard distant thunder of spells. Sylph sent Damien a concerned glance.

“What’s going on with your skin? Are you still using Void magic?”

“I’m not using it, but I drew in a lot to kill the Seed.” Damien looked down at his hands. The Void-infused tattoos still covered his body, though they’d stopped hurting. The Void waited patiently within his core and throughout every part of his body, infused so deeply with him that he

struggled to tell where it ended and where he started. “Actually, I’m not sure if this is ever going to go away.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Is it going to have even more negative effects?”

“No clue,” Damien said.

*Henry?*

“Equally as unsure,” Henry said from Damien’s shadow. “It’s not like I’ve ever had a chance to observe something like this before. His body doesn’t seem unstable, if that’s what you’re worried about. It’s no worse than what I did to you with the Corruption.”

Sylph let out a small sigh and nodded. “Good. We should probably go see if we can find Whisp and the other professors. I can hear them fighting the Corruption.”

A tendril rose from Damien’s shadow and reached into his belt, pulling out Delph’s book and offering it to Sylph.

“Here,” Henry said. “Stick the axe back in this. Best not to leave it lying around until we really understand how it works. Delph wouldn’t have kept it in a book if it was wise to leave it out.”

Sylph flipped the book open and touched the axe to it. There was a soft *pop*, and the axe vanished, appearing within its pages. She tossed it back to Damien, who slipped it back into its sack and pulled the drawstrings shut.

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The fight was not going well. Damien and Sylph found the temporary base camp that the defenders of Blackmist had set up with little trouble. Dozens of large tents had been set up in a large square.

Many of them were taken up by wounded mages. Even from just a glance, it was clear there weren’t nearly enough healers to deal with the number of hurt men and women. Any wounds that weren’t immediately life-threatening had been left to be treated by more mundane means.

Whisp was in a large tent near the front, a small diorama of Blackmist and its surroundings set up on a table before her. Dozens of tiny lights flickered around it in a variety of colors.

She paced around the tent, drumming her metal clad hands against her thighs and muttering under her breath. Whisp spotted Damien and Sylph as

they approached, keeping a wide berth from the injured mages to avoid interfering with the healer's work.

"You better be coming with good news," Whisp said. Her eyes lingered on Damien's tattoos.

*Well, she definitely recognizes that these are Void runes.*

"The Seed is dead," Damien said. "How long have we been gone?"

She let out a relieved sigh. "Good. It's been a day since we last spoke, and the last thing we needed was another problem. Are you and Sylph able to continue fighting?"

"We're in good shape," Damien confirmed. "Are things going poorly in the fight?"

"This is no fight. Look at this," Whisp said, tapping the diorama. The colors on it changed, reducing to just two. A massive sea of green covered the ground around Blackmist, only held back by a thin line of purple. "I've never seen this many monsters in one area in my life. Not even on the frontlines."

"Eight Planes," Damien breathed. "Each of those lights is a Corrupted monster? There are thousands. How are we holding the line? Are the professors really that strong?"

Whisp snorted. "According to Delph and Dredd, they're significantly below average in strength compared to many of the other monsters they've seen. The students and professors have actually been doing a good job at holding the horde back, but there's only so much Ether to go around with the Corruption chewing it up."

"What about the other colleges?" Damien asked.

"They're not getting hit nearly as hard as we are," Whisp replied. "From what I've heard, there are only enough monsters attacking the other locations to keep them from reinforcing us. We've evidently got something the Corruption wants."

"I thought the thing they wanted was the artifact that they already stole. Why do they still care about us so much?" Sylph asked.

"I wish I knew." Whisp grimaced. "We don't have the manpower to worry about it right now. Everyone that can still fight is on rotation, holding the Corruption back for as long as possible until we can get reinforcements. The battle at the capitol is going well, and the queen has confirmed that backup will be coming."

“I still can’t believe the Corruption managed to snatch the damn artifact right out from under your nose after all the damn work we went through to get it. You never said how that happened.”

“The frontlines weren’t at the front of my mind at the moment,” Whisp snapped, but Damien could see the shame in her eyes. She’d screwed up and she knew it. “I didn’t think the artifact would be in that much danger, and I thought the Corruption wanted it to keep us from getting it, not because it would give them a way to control the horde. Either way, I can’t do anything about it now.”

“Let’s focus on what we can do, then,” Damien said, his features grim. “It sounds like we’ve got at least one good thing happening. The queen’s forces should be really powerful, so as long as we hold out until they arrive, we should be fine, right?”

“We would be, if they arrive on time,” Whisp said dryly. “I’m not holding out hope.”

“How bad are casualties?” Sylph asked.

“Minor across the board, though we’ve had some losses. The Corruption doesn’t seem to be concerned with actually killing us. It’s just pushing us farther and farther back. None of the students you were training with have been killed. The queen recalled Stormsword and Yui as soon as we all got back to Blackmist.”

“I knew he was here,” Damien muttered.

“He was keeping tabs on you for the queen, the shifty bastard,” Whisp said. The diorama blinked, several of the lights on it turning red. Whisp cursed. “My break is over. I don’t like you, Vale, but keep your eyes out. You and Sylph. The queen looks far into the future when thinking about the kingdom’s safety. This war isn’t the end of us, as far as she’s concerned. Don’t forget that—and get your assess to the fight as soon as you’re able to. We need the bodies.”

Whisp floated into the air and shot off, heading toward the blinking lights on her diorama. Damien watched her go, the frown on his face deepening.

“She’s saying the queen might try to do something to you,” Sylph said.

“Yeah, I gathered as much,” Damien said. “I’d like to think that Stormsword wouldn’t sell me out, even if he knew the truth about Henry, but I’m not dumb enough to believe that for a second. I’ll just try to avoid

her. Once the war is done, we can slip away and not have to worry about it at all.”

The lights on the diorama blinked once more. Damien leaned over it, studying the shifting sea of green that covered their surroundings. The green lights consistently blinked out wherever they met the purple ring, but more always emerged from the edges to take their places. The purple lights remained mostly steady, only occasionally going out. Several of them moved to and away from the model of the base camp at the edge of Blackmist.

“I don’t think it matters where we show up. The Corruption is everywhere.” Sylph’s brow creased, her lips pressed thin. “I’m not sure how much use I’ll be against something like this, though. There are so many, and I don’t have any good way to get rid of a lot of enemies at once.”

“Just keep Damien alive,” Henry said. He writhed up Damien’s back, and his wings unfurled, casting a shadow over the diorama. “He likes putting himself in situations where he can get killed. Let us take care of the rabble while you just make sure the rabble doesn’t take care of him.”

“I can do that. The sooner we get there, the more people we can save. Maybe we can stem the monsters if we find a way to get that necklace back.”

“That’s a good idea, but I have no idea where the damn thing would be,” Damien said with a frown. “Do you think you’d be able to find it? It’s got to be somewhere in or near the horde.”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” Sylph promised. “Let’s do what we can to back everyone else up, and if I spot the necklace, we can try to carve a path and take it back.”

“Right.” Runes gathered before Damien’s eyes as the Void suggested another spell. The corners of his lips curled up and he nodded. “Let’s end this before Second can do any more damage.”

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FIVE

Ether warped the air, storming around the battlefield as hundreds of mages all drew on it, desperately trying to repel the enormous horde pressing in toward them. Balls of flame streaked through the air and exploded with brilliant flashes in the sea of monsters. Lightning raked through their ranks, and the ground trembled as jagged spikes erupted from it.

Tendrils of mental energy swept over the Corruption's army in unison with the spells, interrupting their connection to the Ether just before the barrages struck. Each wave of attacks tore through the army, killing hundreds of enemies.

And still, they pressed on. Barriers of light and dark magic glowed dimly under their pressing mass, the only thing separating the majority of the mages from the monsters attacking them.

It looked like a solid half of their enemies were just normal monsters, as far as Damien could tell. It was easy to spot the warped, pale forms of the Corruption lumbering amongst them. That meant that, if they could somehow wrest the necklace from Second or his Seeds, nearly half of Second's army would vanish in an instant.

A huge spout of magma exploded in the middle of the enemy ranks, washing out and solidifying around the Corruption, freezing it in place, and Damien caught a glimpse of Quinlan as she leapt into the fray, molten whips flashing around her and carving apart the Corruption.

Damien and Sylph leaped into action. He Warp Stepped past the line of mages, appearing in the midst of the monsters. Void swelled within his body, and he thrust his hands outward, directing it like a conductor. “**Shatter.**”

Lines of black energy zigzagged out from his hands, vanishing into the horde around him. Screams filled the air as they cracked, snapping space and anything in their path. Dozens of monsters crumpled to the ground, seriously wounded.

Even as the Corruption started to heal the ones that it could, Henry's mental energy washed over the area like a blanket, smothering all of them. Sylph flashed across the field, moving so quickly that she was standing beside Damien before he'd even fully registered the movement.

All the monsters in a wide circle around them crumpled, falling dead to the ground. A blast of magma threw a smoking Devourer beast across the ground and Quinlan spun toward them, readying a spell. Her eyes widened and she lowered her hands.

“Damien! Sylph! You’re back?”

An ape-like monster lunged at her, but a spear of lava shot out from behind her, impaling it through the eye before it could get close. Its body sizzled and popped as it melted away.

“Right in time, apparently,” Damien said. “Aren’t you supposed to be with the support team?”

“We couldn’t afford to hold back any longer,” Quinlan replied. She thrust her hands forward and a wave of lava bubbled up from the ground. It crashed down over a large section of monsters, filling the air with the smell of burnt meat and furious screaming. She staggered, bending over to catch her breath for a moment. “I don’t know what’s going on, but they suddenly started fighting much harder than they had been. We’re losing ground, so we couldn’t afford to spare anyone.”

Screams rose up from the line behind them. Damien formed a dozen overloaded gravity spheres just out of range of the mages and detonated them, ripping through the ranks of the horde. Once again, Henry kept them from healing, and none of them rose from the corpse-laden ground.

Spells rained down on the monsters once again, shaking the ground around them. Henry’s wings flapped, lifting Damien just far enough into the air to avoid losing his balance. His mage armor warped as Henry took over it, blocking a strike from a Corrupted monster in the shape of a huge stone mantis.

The eye in the center of his armor snapped open, and a dozen tiny splits in reality carved the mantis into shreds. It crumbled to the ground.

“Let’s just focus on killing as many of them as we can,” Henry said. “Corruption or not, these things are still fairly weak. We can clear them out no problem.”

The horde surged forward once more, and Damien and Sylph raced to meet them. The sky rumbled far above as black clouds eclipsed the sun. Lightning crackled within them, and Damien lost himself in the flow state of battle as rain started to pour down on both armies.

The teeming masses seemed to meld together into one endless monster. Damien wasn’t sure how much time passed, or how much Ether he still had left. All he knew is that he called to the Void, and the Void answered. Broken runes fluttered around him, dipping in and out of a whirlwind of churning energy.

Damien wasn’t sure when it happened but, at one point, he turned to unleash a deluge of Void-infused lightning into their enemies, but there was nothing but a mound of broken corpses before him.

He spun, his eyes searching for a target, but the monsters around him had formed a large circle, keeping out of the range of his most devastating attacks. All of them but one. Pale, gaunt skin stretched over a towering humanoid monster, its eyes two pools of sickly green.

The skin on its face rippled and formed into a jagged mouth that stretched open to let out a moaning roar. Damien’s skin prickled and he sent a wave of Void lightning into the monsters around him, forcing them back before they could advance any further.

#### *Another Seed.*

There was no sign of Sylph, but Damien could still hear the sounds of fighting around him, beyond the circle. They’d gotten separated at some point during the fight. Damien quickly Warp Stepped into the air, getting a better view of his surroundings.

It didn’t take him long to find Sylph—but she didn’t bear good news with her. A second Seed loomed above her, and the two had already launched into a violent fight. The monsters around them had wisely chosen not to press any closer.

Damien Warp Stepped back to the ground, matching gazes with the Seed. The lumbering monster hadn’t taken a single step forward yet. There was no doubt in Damien’s mind that it was controlled by Second.

“Why don’t you come out here and do this yourself?” Damien asked, his veins prickling as Void energy pumped through him. “Scared?”

In response, the Seed roared. It thrust its hands forward, sending a spray of acid hurtling toward Damien. He Warp Stepped, vanishing to the side and hurling a Void empowered gravity sphere at the monster.

“Help Sylph!” Damien yelled to Henry. “I’ll hold this off until you can back me up!”

Henry didn’t bother arguing. His shadow split away and shot across the battlefield, streaking over to where Sylph fought her own opponent. The Seed spun toward Damien and unleashed another spray of acid.

Damien Warp Stepped once more. The acid splattered against the ground and onto some of the monsters around them, burning through it in seconds. Screams filled the air, echoing all around Damien like a horrifying symphony.

His gravity sphere struck the Seed in the side, ripping through its body and shattering bones. But, even as the damage wreaked havoc in the monster, it started to reform. Second was pouring a massive amount of power into the creature, healing it in just seconds.

Damien extended his mental energy, trying to cut the Seed off from its surroundings, but Second had spared absolutely no efforts with this one—it wasn’t just connected to the environment. Every single other monster in the area was also tied to it. There were so many strands that Damien wasn’t confident he could handle every single one of them on his own.

The Seed lurched toward him, spikes erupting from its arms and shooting out like streamers toward Damien. He drew on the Void and clenched his hand in the air.

**“Shatter.”**

The air detonated with a loud *crack*, streaks of Void carving through everything in its path. Screaming and spraying acid in every direction, the Seed stumbled. Its arms had broken in a dozen different spots, but still the streamers tried to reach out for him.

Damien Warp Stepped once more, putting himself on the other side of the makeshift arena. He sent a huge wave of Void-empowered lightning into the surrounding monsters, trying to sever some of the walking health pools for the Seed, but it was a pointless attack.

Even as dozens of charred corpses crumpled to the ground, more pushed forward to take their places. There was an endless supply of monsters that Second had to draw on. Damien gritted his teeth and spun back to the Seed as it rose back to its full height, the damage he’d done completely reversed.

*Second is really putting a lot of work into keeping me here. That probably means Henry and Sylph are fighting something even more important. Maybe I should have had Henry stay with me, but then Sylph could have gotten overwhelmed. She's faster than I am, but I'm still harder to catch.*

*Can I risk teleporting over to them, finishing off their Seed, and then coming back for this one?*

Damien Warp Stepped into the air to get a better view of the battle—and he suppressed a curse almost instantly. Second had played his hand right. At some point during the fight, they'd gotten considerably closer to Blackmist. In the time it took Damien to run over and back Sylph up, the Seed could likely reach the other mages and do a considerable amount of damage to them.

*Fine. If we're playing the game that way, then we'll play the game that way.*

Damien re-formed on the ground before the Void Seed, thrusting both of his hands forward and drinking deeply from the Void. Power ripped through his body and screamed through the air as a dozen massive bolts of black lightning carved through the air, slamming into the Seed in unison.

The world fluctuated around Damien, the grayscale growing stronger. He was drawing disturbing levels of Void energy, but it wasn't like he had a choice. With any luck, today would be the last time he had to drink so deeply from it.

Screaming in pain, the Seed's body crumbled. It staggered back, stone blooming from the enormous amount of damage it had just taken. Acid poured down its body as monsters all around them crumpled to the ground, drained to husks.

Damien wasn't about to let the Seed reform, though. His lips pressed thin, and he thrust his hands forward once more, releasing another wave of lightning into the monster. Then he released another.

And another.

The Seed crumpled, unable to withstand the enormous amounts of energy raining down on it. No matter how many creatures it could draw from, it still had to heal in the first place. Damien cast his mental energy out, encircling the strands connecting the freak of nature to the world around it.

Then, he drew them taut. As weakened as it was, the Seed could resist his deluge no longer. The Void empowered Damien to enormous heights, letting him blow past the monster's will and finally lock it in place.

Splitting his mind, Damien sent another blast of Void-empowered energy into the already-dying Seed.

With a final screech, the monster collapsed to the ground, fully turned to stone. Its body crumbled apart lay still, finally defeated. Damien let his hands drop, his heart hammering in his chest.

There was still no time to rest. After taking just a few more breaths, Damien gathered his power and Warp Stepped away from the circle of monsters before they could even think about closing in on him.

He found Sylph in just a few moments, arriving just as their combined might brought down the Seed they were up against. Sylph's shirt was ripped up around her back and shoulders and she was dripping corrupted blood, but the wounds sealed shut even as Damien watched.

"Took your sweet time, huh?" Sylph asked, wiping her face with the back of a hand. "Thanks for sending Henry, though. That was getting pretty nasty. Second is really juicing these things up."

"I know," Damien said with a grimace. He glanced around the monsters surrounding them, his fingers twitching. He could handle a lot of the Void now, but there was only so much he could risk taking on before he risked something overwhelming him.

Fortunately, none of the remaining monsters had moved in yet, but it was probably only a matter of time. For whatever reason, Second seemed content to let them catch a breather, and Damien wasn't going to complain about it.

"Did you find the necklace?" Damien asked hopefully, but Sylph was already shaking her head.

"No. I think that's why Second made these Seeds so much stronger. He was buying time for whoever had the necklace to book it. Look around us. They're pulling back."

Damien blinked, then looked away from her. Sylph was right. It wasn't that the monsters had stopped pushing forward and were biding their time—it was that the majority of them had already retreated. There were only a few left surrounding them, and Henry remedied that issue an instant later.

Damien slowly let the Void fade from his fingertips. His tattoos pulsated, dimming slightly but remaining clearly visible on his skin. If he

hadn't been certain before, he was now. They weren't going anywhere.

Damien squinted around the battlefield, grimacing at the acrid stench of death that reached his nose. He was completely covered in gore and viscera. Henry had done a brilliant job of keeping him from getting injured, but that had done little to keep him clean, especially after the last fight with the Seed.

"At least we killed two more Seeds. I'm surprised Second wasted them like that," Sylph said. "How are you doing, though? I saw a few glimpses of your fight. You took out a Seed entirely on your own. Are you...well, okay? Using that much Void can't be safe for you. You aren't feeling any ill effects from it, are you?"

"Not yet," Damien muttered. "I don't know how many more times I'm going to be able to draw that much power, though. It might be wiser to avoid having to do that again in the future. I don't want to take out Second only to turn myself into an evil Void monster and end up destroying the Mortal Plane myself."

Sylph's eyes fell to the markings covering him, and she let out a dark-humored laugh. "That would be ironic, wouldn't it? At least you've got some cool tattoos."

"Like them?" Damien asked with a weary grin.

Sylph raised an eyebrow and cocked her head to the side. "We'll see if they grow on me. Did you feel like you were losing control during the fight?"

"Not really." Damien shook his head. "More like I just got really involved in it. I never lost track of who was on my side. It was a flow state more than a berserker rage."

"That's a relief. You returning to that Void-fugue state is the last thing we need. No trouble with emotions?"

"Nothing beyond what was there before. That might honestly be concerning, though. I think the Void is getting more natural for me to use, and I don't really want to think too much about what that means."

"Me neither. Sounds like a problem I'm going to ignore and desperately hope goes away by the time we win the rest of this shit. We should probably regroup with the others and see how bad the damage was, then."

Damien glanced around the tall hills of corpses surrounding them. "If it was anything like it was here, this is going to take forever to clean up."

Sylph pulled a tooth that had been lodged in Damien's mage armor out and flicked it to the side. "So long as we aren't the ones that have to clean it up. You need a shower."

"How'd you manage to avoid getting dirty? You just have a few cuts from the fight with the Seed." Damien said, Warp Stepping into the air to scope their surroundings. Henry's wings thumped, buying him enough time to spot a group of Blackmist professors and students gathering a short distance away.

"I was faster than the blood was," Sylph replied as he returned to the ground. "Also, wind armor. It's got its uses."

"The way you say that seems to imply that I don't," Henry said. "I'd like it to be very clear that I take offense to that."

"You take offense to everything," Sylph said. She darted off in the direction of the other mages, and Damien teleported after her. The group was fairly large, with Quinlan and several members from the support group among their number.

Xil flinched as Damien arrived, an icy blade forming in the air above her hand before she spotted Sylph. Her eyebrows rose and she reevaluated Damien, allowing the Ether to slip away and letting the spell drop.

"Damien? You look...different."

"I was going to say awful," Gaves said. He leaned heavily on Bella's shoulder, his face several shades paler than normal. Judging by the massive rips in his clothes, he'd taken some serious wounds and had only recently been healed. "Decent enough tattoos, though. You look brutal."

"You look dangerous. More so than usual," Quinlan corrected. "I don't know what happened, but you and Sylph arrived just on time. I thought we were going to get overrun."

"Where's everyone else?" Sylph asked. "The professors and the rest of the support team?"

"You just missed Dredd," Gaves said. "He rushed off a few minutes ago when it became clear that the monsters were falling back. I think he mentioned something about reinforcements getting here earlier than expected."

"I don't think he was talking about the two of you," Xil added. "He took Kat with him. I haven't seen the rest of the professors since the fighting started."

Damien grunted, an apprehensive pit forming in his stomach. “Is anyone we know dead?”

“Not as far as I know,” Xil replied. “But I haven’t seen anyone but us recently either. After that last attack, I’ve got no idea. If everyone got hit like we did...”

Damien’s senses tingled, warning him as a red portal drew itself into the air beside them. He readied his Ether, only allowing it to lower when Dredd emerged from within the portal. His knuckles were white around his staff, and the man looked more tired than Damien had ever seen him. Dredd’s eyes caught on Damien’s tattoos, then he tore them away to scan the battlefield.

“The Seed is dead?”

Damien nodded. “Three of them, actually. Two more showed up midway through the fight. I have no idea where they came from, but it’s clear that Second is getting really serious. How’d the rest of the fight go?”

“Better than expected. Much better,” Dredd replied. He shoved his staff deeper into the ground, and a faint red disk expanded from its side, forming a makeshift chair for the professor to slump into. “The queen’s army was freed up considerably earlier than we had thought they would be. A few hours ago, the Corruption’s army changed tactics, becoming far more aggressive than they had been. They basically stopped trying to regenerate themselves, and most of the locations with fewer attackers swept them apart.”

“That sounds like good news,” Xil said, her tone rising with hope. “Right?”

“It’s good, for now. The problem is that we don’t understand *why* the Corruption would do that,” Dredd said. “It’s completely illogical, and that means we probably don’t understand something. We need to figure out what we’re missing before we get shown the hard way. They’ve also still got the necklace they stole from Whisp. We did our best to try to locate it this fight, but it slipped our grasp. Again.”

“Most of the Corruption isn’t particularly clever,” Damien supplied. He sat down on a pile of rubble that had once been a Corrupted monster and stretched his neck to try and loosen it. “But Second is. He probably figured out what we were doing and sent the Seeds to slow me and Sylph while stalling everyone else out with the normal monsters. Unless he got what he wanted, he’ll be back.”

“Perhaps,” Dredd allowed. “We’ll find out, one way or another. The Corrupted army hasn’t completely retreated. They’ve just pulled back and, as you said, I doubt they’re going anywhere anytime soon. The scale of that attack was vastly beyond just a skirmish. They want something. Speaking of which, Damien, I’d suggest you tread carefully.”

“Why would— Ah. You’re not talking about the Corruption.”

Dredd grunted, suddenly finding the callouses on his hands fascinating. “Just watch yourself. Battlefields aren’t safe for anyone. Especially when the fight isn’t over yet.”

The professor pushed himself to his feet with a grunt. The energy chair blinked out, and he tugged his staff out of the ground. “I need to report back to the base camp and confirm that we didn’t suffer any casualties. Is everyone fully prepared?”

“I’m pretty sure it isn’t going to get any worse there. I’m surprised you decided to rest here instead of taking us right back, actually. Like you said, there could still be monsters or the like around,” Xil said. “What do we need to be prepared for back in the camp that we didn’t have to face out here?”

“It’s because he’s trying to avoid something at the camp. Delph, probably,” Quinlan said with a small grin. “Or maybe Kat.”

Gaves’ eyes narrowed. He gritted his teeth and steadied himself on his own weight, letting go of Bella. “No. It’s the queen, isn’t it? She’s already set up in the base camp?”

Dredd tapped his staff on the ground and traced a red portal in the air with an end. It sprung open with a *hiss*, and he nodded into it. “So, she has, and she’s taken control of the army during the duration of her stay. We’re expected to report back as soon as we can so she can determine what she has to work with. It wouldn’t do to keep her waiting any longer. Time to go, children.”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-SIX

The support team filed into the portal, and it wasn't long before the only people still standing outside it were Damien, Sylph, and Dredd. The professor let out a weary sigh.

"It might be wiser for the two of you to head the other direction," Dredd said, glancing at the churning disk of energy. "I do not think meeting the queen will go well."

"Isn't suggesting that treason?" Sylph asked. "The queen's orders are law."

Dredd's tired face creased in faint amusement, and he let out a short laugh. "I've broken more laws than you've lived years, Sylph, and Delph has done ten times worse. You don't stick around in our field without learning which fights to take. I can't say for certain that the queen holds you ill will, but she's going to suspect something, especially after reports of what you and Sylph did to the Corrupted army reach her—if they haven't already. No Year Three could do what you have. Add that to the rumors of Sylph's incredible speed and green blood, as well as your arrival when you returned from the Void..."

"You think we should just run?" Damien asked. "Won't that just make the queen even more suspicious of us?"

"I'm not telling you what to do. I'm giving you a choice," Dredd corrected. "I won't force you to come through this portal. Just be aware of what's waiting on the other side. Maybe it will go well. I don't know. Just make your decision. I can't justify waiting here for long."

"Hil—my mom is there, right?"

Dredd nodded. "Somewhere."

“Then, I’ll go. I promised I’d see her again, and I’d be putting her at risk if I tried to avoid the queen. I don’t think it would be beyond her to try to do something if she felt I was truly a threat to the kingdom. It’s better to deal with the problem before it arises.”

Dredd just nodded toward the portal. Damien didn’t bother asking Sylph if she was certain she wanted to join him. By now, he knew the answer.

The two of them stepped into the swirling red Ether and vanished, yanked away by Dredd’s energy and sent hurtling toward the other end of the portal. The trip didn’t last long, as the base camp was a relatively short distance away.

They were spat out in the large tent in front of Whisp’s diorama of the battlefield. A large ring of heavily armored mages stood in a ring along the edge of the tent. Damien spotted Kat speaking with several students. Xil and Venus had joined Quinlan beside the rest of the support team.

Mark and Elania both sat to the side of the room, inspecting what looked to be the clawed foot of some monster that one of them had liberated from the battlefield. Aven and Cheese stood just behind them, locked in a heated argument with a guard. Damien was pretty sure that Cheese was trying to challenge him to a fight.

But through all the controlled chaos in the room, Damien’s eyes were drawn to the far end of the tent. A regal woman wearing matte gold armor stood with her palms resting on a shimmering sword planted in the ground. Stains and scratches on her armor showed that she hadn’t sat the battle out, and every piece of equipment she wore exuded Ether. Stormsword stood beside her, whispering something into her ear. At her other side sat Yui and Carson, both slumped over their chairs and covered with small wounds that hadn’t been worth a healer’s time to fix.

The gold-clad woman’s eyes broke away from Stormsword as Damien and Sylph arrived in the room. He followed her gaze, and his features tightened as he spotted Damien and Sylph. His eyes flicked down to Damien’s tattoos and they narrowed. He leaned over to the queen and whispered something.

Dredd stepped through the portal behind them, and it snapped closed. He thumped his staff on a stone jutting out of the ground, drawing everyone’s attention to them.

“That’s everyone who was on the southwestern front,” Dredd said.

“Report on the status of the Corruption in that area,” the woman said, her eyes not straying from Damien. “Acting Dean Whisp’s artifact appears to have failed in that area. It lost track of the majority of the Corruption’s force in that area.”

“There do not appear to be any issues with the artifact. The Corruption’s forces on the southwestern front were decimated,” Dredd replied. “Only a small portion of them survived the battle.”

Mutters passed through the room, silenced as the woman—who could have only been the queen—raised a closed hand.

“My commendations to you and Kat as well as your teams,” the queen said. “I am pleased to hear the training was effective.”

“It was,” Dredd confirmed. “We accounted for approximately fifteen percent of the Corruption’s losses.”

“Fifteen percent?” Stormsword asked. “What killed the rest of them?”

“They did,” Dredd said, nodding to Damien and Sylph.

“Who are they? They look like kids,” one of the guards said, staring at them with undisguised surprise. “Do they have some special ability that works against the Corruption better than everyone else’s?”

“Delph’s proteges,” Dredd replied. “Though they have already surpassed both him and I in many ways. They were able to fight the leader of the Corruption’s force to a standstill in Forsad.”

“Then, they have done a great service to the kingdom,” the queen said. “What magics do the two of you wield to possess such power? What companions have you bonded with?”

*Ah. There it is. What do you think, Henry? Lie?*

“I’ve got a pretty convincing appearance, and the warding circle on your head should keep anyone from sifting around in your thoughts. Can’t hurt,” Henry said. He slipped out of Damien’s shadow, taking up his cute and spherical form.

“Space magic, mostly,” Damien said. “This is Henry, my companion.”

“And I use Wind and Dark magic. My companion is Human,” Sylph said. The tiny fairy shimmered to life in a shower of small white sparks and fluttered around Sylph’s head before vanishing once more. “She’s a little shy in large crowds.”

A few guards chuckled at Sylph’s name for the sylph, but neither Stormsword nor the queen looked amused. Several of the guards around her

shifted, picking up on the mood but failing to see what was causing the disturbance.

“We have more than enough time to deal with introductions later,” Dredd said. “Right now, even though the Corruption has pulled back, their forces are still there. We should prepare for another siege. As all of us saw, they were far more aggressive in the last push than we were used to. If they continue throwing themselves at us like that, we’re going to get pushed back. We need a new plan.”

“You are Stormsword’s son, correct?” the queen asked Damien, ignoring Dredd.

“Hilla Vale is my mother,” Damien said, inclining his head slightly.

“Very impressive. He says you possess some abilities beyond any of your peers. Your victory in the Year Two intramurals was also very impressive. What plane is your Companion from?”

“The Plane of Darkness. He’s an undiscovered species, as far as we’ve been able to tell.”

“Fascinating. And Sylph—I believe Stormsword is familiar with you. He’s told me about how you first met.”

Sylph stood mutely beside Damien, not responding to the queen’s words. Yui looked up from her spot beside Carson, squinting at her mother in confusion.

“I think Professor Dredd is correct,” Damien said. “We should be focusing on the threat to the kingdom. Sylph and I don’t matter here. We’re just two more warriors.”

“Your worry for the kingdom is admirable,” the queen said. “Fear not. Its best interests are always in my heart. I ask this line of questioning specifically because of the war we find ourselves in. It may come as a surprise to you, but we are actually waging it on two fronts. The Corruption is only one half of the battle.”

“What do you mean, Mom?” Yui asked. “Are you talking about the normal monsters with the Corruption’s army?”

“No. There is another group of monsters that seek to destroy the Mortal Plane,” the queen said. Her gaze sharpened. “Information of their existence has been restricted heavily. They are called the Void. While they number fewer than the Corruption, they pose an enormous threat to all of us. They are just as great a threat as the Corruption—and perhaps greater, as we do not have a tangible enemy to face.”

Damien kept his face straight. “That does sound like a serious threat, but the Corruption are the ones knocking on Blackmist’s doors.”

“Both must be dealt with. Stormsword, where is Delph? The Void is his area of expertise.”

“He left right after you arrived to push the Corruption back,” Dredd reported. He sat down in one of the chairs scattered around the room, grimacing in pain. “He told me to say that he’d return shortly whenever you asked for his whereabouts.”

The queen’s eye twitched. “Insufferable man. No matter. His presence is not required. Stormsword, I believe you had something to share.”

“I did. I had been observing the students train over the past few weeks, before the Corruption made its move,” Stormsword said. A tiny crackle of lightning arced between his fingertips. “Sylph displayed abilities that vaguely resembled Matter magic, which she does not possess. They strongly resembled the appearance of many Corrupted monsters. It was determined that these came from her merger with a Corrupted monster during a previous investigation. I spent a significant amount of time speaking with healers to determine if such a thing was possible, but not a single one of them believed it even remotely within their realm of strength.”

“Get to the point, Stormsword,” the queen said.

“The amount of skill required to bind a Corrupted monster is beyond what any mortal could possess—but it is within the domain of the Void. I have only just now confirmed my suspicions today. The samples of the Void I was researching had broken runes—just like the ones Damien has on his skin. I am forced to see no option but the most likely. My son is possessed by a Void creature and is a threat to us all.”

Conversation erupted around the tent as everyone started trying to yell over each other. Many of the people who knew Damien and Sylph didn’t look all that surprised at the revelation that his companion was more than just something from the Plane of Darkness, but Derrod’s accusation wasn’t something anyone could easily ignore.

“What, me?” Henry asked, touching a tentacle to his head in exaggerated shock. “I could never. I’ve never harmed anything that didn’t deserve it in my entire life. I’m as sweet as a goat.”

“Silence!” the queen snapped. Her tone didn’t rise, but every single conversation in the room slammed to a halt. “I have no reason to doubt

Derrod's research. My expert on the Void has run off on me, as usual, but it changes nothing. Possessed or not, Damien Vale is a threat to the kingdom."

"I'm doing nothing but trying to protect the kingdom," Damien said, not letting them get a rise out of him. He kept his stance neutral, not making any quick or threatening moves to avoid having to kill one of the queen's guards if they thought he was about to try to attack her.

"The Corruption is a threat to the Void. It may also be your enemy, but that does not mean you are our ally."

"This is a pointless argument," Sylph said. "We can go in cycles for ages about who is trying to defend what, but it doesn't change the threat of the Corruption on the horizon."

"But it does mean we have a potential danger standing at our backs instead of in front of us," the queen said. "We have sufficient force to repel the Corruption. Your strength, while significant, is too great of a risk to harbor."

"With all due respect, I do not believe Damien is possessed," Dredd said. "Delph and I have tested him, and we are certain he is in control of his own body."

"You knew?" the queen asked, narrowing her eyes.

Dredd shrugged. "I know much, Queen. There is not room to report everything. Delph was more closely involved with them than I was, and good luck getting him to report anything."

The queen pursed her lips. Several terse seconds of silence passed. Then, she shook her head. "No. The threat is too great. Our greatest warriors are gathering here. A blow from the back could spell our end. I cannot allow it. If Damien is truly in control, then he will do the right thing and allow us to do what is necessary. The Void is a threat that we cannot permit to exist."

Sylph exchanged a glance with Damien out of the corner of her eyes. She shifted her stance slightly, and Damien let a tiny amount of Ether churn within him, preparing to Warp Step away.

*Oh, well. What can I say? I tried. I'm not going to let myself get captured or killed just because the queen is paranoid.*

"I can see by the look in your eyes that you have no plans of resolving this peacefully," the queen said, her hands wrapping around the hilt of her sword. "I thank you for your service up until this point."

She started to pull the blade from the ground but didn't get to finish the movement. The temperature dropped sharply, and a sheet of frost appeared over the queen's hands, freezing them in place around the hilt of her blade. The chill spread downward, freezing the blade into the earth.

Everyone spun toward the source of the attack, only to find Yui standing, her hand outstretched.

"You're making a mistake, Mother," Yui said. "Leave the sword in the ground. Damien is on our side."

The queen's eyes narrowed, and the ice covering her shattered. She turned to fully face Yui, but the princess didn't lower her gaze.

"Do you have any proof?"

"Everything Damien has ever done has been to protect people. I've spent a lot of time with him—more than enough to know that neither he nor Henry are working against us," Yui said, crossing her arms and setting her jaw. "I won't let you start fighting him."

"Princess, I know it's hard to believe that a friend could be working against you," Stormsword said. "He's my son. I understand. But—"

"Shut up," Yui said. "Listen to the words coming out of your mouth. I can't believe you. And really, anyone who's met Henry knows he has no interest in doing anything other than minor pranks. The worst thing I've seen him do is steal my hat."

"I made you a new one. Don't slander my name," Henry protested.

"He did," Yui said.

"The princess is correct," Quinlan said, taking a cautious step forward. "He rescued my sister from what would have been a fatal coma."

"He fights too honestly to have any plots against the kingdom," Mark added. "I trust him more than Stormsword. If you spent more than a minute or two with him, you'd have known that."

Gaves swallowed, joining Mark and Elania with Bella's help. "With all due respect, your Highness, I do not believe Damien is working against us either. He has had numerous opportunities to kill Princess Yui, which would have done massive damage to the kingdom. Damien is dangerous, but not to us."

Aven and Kat both stepped forward as well, but before either of them could speak, a dull thrum filled the room. A whirling gray portal snapped open in the center of the room. Every one of the guards drew their weapons, and Ether surged.

Nolan stepped out of the portal, followed by Delph. Glittering green armor covered his body, and he carried his massive stone sword over his shoulder like it weighed as much as a feather. He glanced around at the bristling mages, then glanced over his shoulder at Damien.

“Reporting for duty,” Delph said with a sloppy salute. “I brought a tagalong.”

“I was informed that my presence was needed here,” Nolan said. “And I think I might be picking up on why. I would like to make it clear that House Gray, with its full force, stands behind Damien Vale and Sylph. We will consider it an affront to our house if anyone attempts to challenge them.”

“The queen is not beholden to the noble houses,” Stormsword growled. “Especially not yours, usurper.”

“I killed my father because he was a fool,” Nolan said. “I looked up to you, Stormsword. Now, I’m just glad your son is nothing alike you. I repeat my earlier statement. Anyone who attempts to raise a hand against Damien will find me and my house their enemy.”

“Are you certain of your words?” the queen asked. “You are asking me to bet a kingdom on them.”

“You may ask my father’s corpse how serious I am about the safety of those I have come to care about.”

“I’ll throw my own bit in,” Delph drawled. “You’ve always been a dense idiot, Stormsword. Latching onto one little idea like a dog with a stick that it won’t let go. While Damien does indeed have a Void creature as his companion, he is not working for the Void.”

“Did anybody *not* know about this?” the queen asked, a dangerous note to her voice. “If you knew Damien had a Void companion, why did you not tell me?”

“Because you’re too worried about the kingdom,” Delph replied. “I was having fun. Simple as that. Keep your hands off my students.”

“You’re certain they pose no threat?”

“Oh, they pose a threat,” Delph said with a chuckle. “But not unless you provoke them.”

“Why did you not tell me this earlier? Do you understand the magnitude of this? The Void is not a toy, Delph. You should know that more than anyone.”

Delph snorted. “I waited to make sure this exact scenario would happen. Look at everyone who knows Damien and Sylph as people. Not a single

one of them believes they're a threat to the kingdom. But what would have happened if you'd received this information during a fight? You might have tried to act, and that would have been quite unfortunate."

"You admit to manipulating the queen?" Stormsword asked, eyes narrow. "You withheld vital information, Delph. This is no joke."

"If you knew half of what I withheld from your pea-sized brain, it would probably pop," Delph said. "Keep that tiny sword of yours in its sheath. As stupid as you are, the Corruption is enough of a threat that I don't want to waste resources."

The queen clapped her hands, and a blinding flash of golden light washed through the room, silencing everyone.

"Enough of this. We will be talking about your inability to report information," the queen growled. She turned to face Yui. "Are you absolutely certain of your words? I find myself unable to trust any of my actual advisors."

"I am," Yui said.

The queen's knuckles whitened, and her lips pressed thin, locked in an internal debate. Despite the situation, Damien didn't envy her. She had to choose between her daughter and right-hand man.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-SEVEN

“I see you’re still troubled. Truly unfortunate,” Delph drawled. “Could we get back to the part where we kill things? I didn’t waste all that time training these little monsters just for them to sit around when we’ve got a war to win.”

“Do you take joy out of antagonizing me?” the queen asked. “I am of half a mind to have you executed; consequences be damned. I don’t even want to think about how much damage you’ve done to the kingdom. Are you *trying* to undermine me? No matter what decision I make here, I risk the kingdom.”

Delph picked at his nose. “Truly unfortunate. Should have chosen an easier job.”

Stormsword’s eyes sparked with blue energy in anger. He took a step forward, but a band of light snapped around his waist and restrained the man before he could fly at Delph. The queen pulled him back to her side.

“Heel, Stormsword,” Delph chuckled. “The queen doesn’t want me breaking her favorite toy yet.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d ask you if you were even on our side.” Damien rubbed his forehead. “This isn’t exactly the right situation to antagonize people.”

“On the contrary, I can’t think of a better time. It’s difficult to get this many powerful morons stuck in the same room for any period of time,” Delph replied. The guards surrounding them all shifted uncomfortably, but nobody made a move without the queen’s permission.

“The more time we waste, the more time the Corruption has to prepare another attack,” Dredd said. He paused for a moment, then grimaced. “And

the more time Delph has to set you at each other's throats. I implore you to reach a decision before my brother turns this meeting into a brawl."

"I believe there is only one conclusion that can result in anything that does not plunge the kingdom into a second war," Nolan said. "Have some faith in your subjects, my Queen. You knew me as a child. You know your daughter. You know the professors, and the students speaking out in Damien and Sylph's favor are some of the strongest in their classes. Even your daughter's protectors—as overzealous as they are—do not believe him a threat."

"If I am wrong, millions will die. The Mortal Plane could fall," the queen snapped. "Do you understand the consequences of this, Gray? The costs we will all pay if you are wrong?"

"Rejoice!" Delph thrust his hands into the air. "A sudden thought has struck me. Perhaps one more witness will sway your mind."

A gray portal tore open in front of him. Golden light spilled out from within it and an immense pressure crashed down on the room, sending many of the guards to their knees. Stormsword staggered, surprise washing over his face. Damien's mental energy swirled around him, but the force was nearly enough to take even him down. Sylph and the queen both also remained standing, but everyone else was forced to grab onto something or fall.

Blue Ether crackled across Stormsword's blade, and he leveled it, putting himself between the portal and the queen. The golden light receded, and Hilla stepped out from within it, her features etched with fury.

"I present to you, Hilla Vale," Delph called. "Damien's mother."

Hilla spun, striking Delph across the cheek with an open palm. His head snapped to the side, and a red imprint of her hand quickly formed beneath his stubble. He rubbed his face with a hand, grimacing.

"How dare you keep me from entering here while these fools discussed the fate of my son," Hilla spat.

"It's called dramatic effect, but I probably deserved that."

"We'll talk later," Hilla said. She turned to face the queen and Stormsword, and the golden energy filling the room grew even brighter. Arcs of Ether danced around her as Hilla's hands and jaw trembled with unrestrained anger.

"Release the Ether," one of the guards said, pushing himself upright and stepping toward Hilla. "We will be forced to assume you are attacking—"

Golden vines erupted from Hilla's hand, binding around the man's mouth and yanking his limbs down to his body. He pitched back and hit the ground with a thud, completely immobilized.

"Calm yourself, Hilla," the queen said. "You spent many good years of service on the frontlines, but I cannot excuse attacks on my men."

"And I cannot excuse an attack on my son."

"Hilla, we can discuss this—" Derrod started.

For the second time, golden vines erupted from the ground. They snapped around Derrod's hands and slammed his jaw shut as they encircled his head.

"Not another word from you," Hilla spat. "More than anyone else, you should be ashamed. Accusing your own son with absolutely no knowledge of what you speak of. When was the last time you acted as a father? I saw your *training* the last time we were at home. I thought you and Damien just had some rough patches to work out, but now I see that the true reason for your faltering relationship is that I married a stupid, shortsighted, murderous dog that would sooner execute his own family than admit he made a mistake."

Vines of light pulled Derrod out of the way as Hilla stormed up to the queen, coming to a stop just in front of the taller woman. She crossed her arms before her chest and leaned in until their noses were nearly touching.

"You've already taken my husband. Keep your bloody hands off my son. He's done nothing but try to protect this kingdom."

"How can I know for sure?" the queen demanded. "Do you think I want to kill a child, Hilla? Do you think I *enjoy* this? I have to think of all of my people! Step back, Hilla. Release Derrod and my men. Stay out of the way, or I will be forced to use force."

"Tell me something," Delph said, raising a hand. "Nothing would destabilize the kingdom more than losing its leader, correct?"

"What kind of question is that?" the queen asked. "Are you threatening me? I didn't think you were that stupid, Delph."

"Not me," Delph said, shaking his head. He pointed a finger at Damien and Sylph. "You know how I determined Damien was still human and in control? I threatened Sylph. The Void cannot process emotions, but he acted to protect her anyway."

"The Void can fake such things, can it not?"

“It can, but it’s about to be a moot point. Due to a series of unfortunate events that I may have some fault in, Damien’s memories of his mother were damaged. They only recently started to get to know each other again, and I think he would be very cross if you interfered in that. Forget the Void throwing the kingdom into chaos. Keep this path up and you’ll do it yourself.”

The queen’s eyes bored into Delph. She gently moved Hilla out of the way and turned her gaze down to Damien. She pulled her blade from the ground and, keeping the point of the weapon directed at the ground, slowly walked toward him. She stopped a foot away, and they locked eyes with each other.

“Is this true?”

“If you were a poor enough queen to hurt any of your own subjects without basis, then the kingdom would be better off ruled by Yui.”

“And you believe you have the power to act on such impulses? In a room of my strongest soldiers? Even if you could defeat me, could you stop them from taking your friends and family hostage?”

Henry dipped back into Damien’s shadow. The lights in the room faded as he rose once more. But instead of his friendly shape, Henry emerged in his Full Manifestation. His gaunt hands settled on Damien’s shoulders, and his skin-covered mouth wrinkled in a wide smile.

“When I arrived in this world, I fully planned on destroying it to protect the Cycle,” Henry said. “Damien stopped me every step of the way, until I realized that my goals were no longer what they once were. If it wasn’t for him, not a single one of you would still remain. So, when I tell you the only reason you currently exist is because he wills it, I am not exaggerating in the slightest. I bore of this game. We have more important things to do. I could enter your mind and shatter your will this very instant if I wanted to, but Damien will not let me—yet. Continue pressing on this path, and you will discover exactly what I am capable of.”

“I was under the impression that the Void cannot feel. Why do you care?” the queen asked. She gestured to everyone in the tent. “What does any of this matter to you?”

Henry chuckled. “I am so much more than just a Void creature. I am Damien Vale’s companion, and he is mine. A meager mortal such as yourself could never comprehend what we have become. If Damien wanted this kingdom to be destroyed, it would be gone.”

Stormsword grunted, trying to free himself from the vines, but Hilla's magic held him tight. The queen and Henry's eyes bored into each other. Then, she inclined her head, so slightly that Damien nearly missed it.

“Delph, can the Void lie?”

“It can, but not very convincingly. It much prefers omission. There is little reason for it to lie, after all. You lie when you are trying to manipulate a higher power. There is no higher power to the Void.”

The queen nodded. “I have made my judgment. From everything I know of the Void, it cannot process emotion. This creature—Henry—does not seem to lack the slightest bit of personality. I will choose to believe that Damien Vale and his companion are indeed more than what they appear as.”

A collective breath of relief passed through the room as some of the tension drained out of everyone's stances. Hilla allowed her Ether to pull back, freeing the guard that she'd trapped. She did nothing to take the bindings off Stormsword.

“That wasn't so hard, was it?” Delph asked. “All's well that ends well. Well done, me. Say, Sylph, do you still have that book I lent you?”

Sylph mutely pulled it out and handed it to Delph.

“Thanks. I was missing it,” Delph said, tucking it into his pocket. The queen's eyes tracked the motion and raised up to meet his.

“Is that the Void-empowered axe that was meant to be delivered to my armory for safekeeping?” she asked.

Delph cleared his throat. “Well, looks like we're all done here. Cheers, everyone. Glad you're getting along.”

He flung his cloak around him, folding up like a wad of gray paper and vanishing from sight with a faint *pop*. Dredd let out a heavy sigh.

“Madman,” the queen muttered. She straightened and, after one last look at Damien, walked back to stand at her original spot. “I have wasted enough of our time as is. We need to address the Corruption. Their armies are indeed larger than we have believed, especially with the addition of normal monsters to their ranks. Hilla, please release Stormsword. We need him for this fight.”

Hilla pursed her lips. Then, she shook her head. “No. He and I need to have a talk. You might be the queen, but I'm his wife. I'll return him to his duty once we've spoken. Dredd, be a dear and open a portal to somewhere private.”

“I'm not sure—” the professor started.

“That was not a request,” Hilla said, grabbing Derrod by the collar. The bands of light restricting him wound even tighter, until his entire body was encased in a cocoon. “Open the portal.”

Dredd opened a portal. Hilla stomped into it, dragging Stormsword behind her, and it snapped shut behind them. Everyone stared at him.

*Well, I don't think the legends of Stormsword are going to remain quite as pristine as they've been up until now. Getting dragged on your ass after you just got scolded isn't exactly awe-inspiring.*

Sylph caught Damien's eye and gave him a small thumbs up. It took a strong force of will to keep himself from bursting into laughter.

“If you want to tell her no, do it yourself,” Dredd said. “Did you see the look on her face? I've seen her fight on the frontlines, you know. The only reason that woman retired is because she got too bored of killing monsters. I'm not going to piss her off any further.”

The queen cleared her throat. “Let's return to strategy, please. For some reason, the Corruption is going after Blackmist in particular. Does *anyone* know why that might be the case? There has to be something it wants.”

Slowly, order returned to the room, and it went back to its original purpose of determining the best way to hold the Corruption off. All the professors and anyone who had interacted with the Corruption voiced from suggestions as to why it might have been going after Blackmist, but most of them were just that Dredd had somehow done something to piss it off.

Sylph leaned in closer to Damien to whisper into his ear. “Is it possible that it's not a thing the Corruption wants?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the Void is the biggest threat to the Corruption, right? And, right now, it doesn't seem to be really doing all that much to interfere with him. What if Second's goal isn't Blackmist at all?”

A chill traveled down Damien's back. “It's us and Henry. Second is after us. Blackmist is just the bait.”

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-EIGHT

“Are you certain?” Dredd asked, leaning closer to them. Somehow, despite the noise of the room around them, the shrewd professor had heard them speaking.

“I just thought of it. I have no idea,” Damien replied. “But it does make a certain amount of sense, doesn’t it? If the Void isn’t keeping him from stopping the Cycle for whatever reason, then that only leaves Henry and me in Second’s path. Delph, too, since his axe actually managed to hurt him. He’d probably need to get rid of us before committing to anything more.”

Dredd pressed his lips together and gave them a small nod. “Yes, there is a degree of logic in that. But, if it’s the case, I do not understand why he would have pulled his forces back. Doing it purely to protect the artifact seems...odd. The artifact should be a means to an end not his final goal. He has to be aiming for something else.”

“What if he doesn’t know our exact location?” Sylph asked. “Everywhere got hit about equally as hard, then got more intense shortly before we showed up, right?”

“He was scouting,” Dredd murmured, his features darkening. “If you’re correct, then that entire wave of Corrupted monsters was just Second trying to determine where you were. The Seeds may have been used to keep you in the area while he got the artifact to safety, and now he knows you’re going to stick around since you’d probably never abandon the school.”

“That would explain why he pulled back,” Sylph said, nodding in agreement. “He got the information he needed. The monsters attacking the other schools let up as well, didn’t they? That’s why the queen was able to get here earlier. They didn’t put up as much of a fight.”

“If that’s just his scouting party...” Dredd trailed off, his face growing a shade paler. He spun, pushing through people and striding up to the queen.

She glanced away from the diorama at him, raising her eyebrows. “Dredd?”

“I have a suspicion as to why the Corruption has pulled back,” Dredd said. “It is very possible that the forces we have been fighting up until now have just been his forward party.”

“You think that horde we fought were truly just scouts?” the queen asked, aghast. “I’ve seen battles on the frontline with fewer enemies. Why do you believe this?”

Dredd drummed his fingers on his staff, pacing back and forth in a tight line. “It’s just a suspicion. I have no way to know for sure, but it lines up.”

The queen studied Dredd’s face, then pursed her lips. “If your suspicion is correct, then we’ll have no way to fend off such a horde. If Second had an army of that size, why has he been holding it in reserve this long? It would have been far wiser to simply attack all at once and completely crush us. As it stands, he’s taken heavy losses and done little to us in return.”

A green light blinked to life on the diorama behind the queen. More followed it, glimmering up like a sea of moss over the plains and mountains surrounding Blackmist. It was impossible to tell one from the other—it was just a smooth blanket.

The queen spun and stared down at the table, her eyes going wide. Within seconds, Blackmist was completely encircled by a wall of sickly light. She took a step back, her hand wrapping instinctively around the hilt of her sword.

“Seven Planes,” she breathed, staring at it in disbelief. A second passed in silence.

“What do we do?” one of the guards asked. He shifted from foot to foot, fear etched into his pale face. “How many even is that?”

“It’s malfunctioning,” Whisp’s voice came from within the crowd. The acting dean pushed through the mages filling the tent. Her gauntlets were cracked and pitted from acid, and several open wounds still dripped blood.

“Whisp. I was wondering where you’d went. What do you mean by malfunctioning?” the queen asked, as the entire room held a pensive, hopeful breath. “It’s not reading the enemy army correctly?”

“It can’t count all of them,” Whisp replied grimly. “I was out trying to scout the enemy while they were retreating, and I saw them. There were so

many I couldn't even make out the ground beneath, and every single one of them is Corrupted. They look to be significantly more powerful than the first wave as well. Looks like Second did something to the artifact, and that passed on into the monsters it was controlling. I don't know how we're going to repel that massive horde if they all come at us again."

Worried murmurs filled the room. Mages glanced around, and several people silently left the tent. If they were going to try to run, Damien couldn't blame them.

"How? Where are they arriving from? There weren't that many uncorrupted monsters in the first place! Not this many, at least!" the queen demanded. "It's impossible to teleport that many beings at once!"

"They didn't teleport. They came out from beneath the ground," Whisp replied with a grimace. "Like weeds. And there were still more coming when I left. It's like the entire earth is completely teeming with the Corruption."

The queen let out several curse words that, even despite the situation, made a few of her guards' eyes widen. She leaned over the diorama, thinking furiously.

"Where are the other deans?"

"Defending their schools, last I heard," Whisp replied. "They're worried about leaving their land behind and letting the Corruption overtake it while they're out."

The queen's hands clenched, and her brow creased in concentration. Several seconds passed, and the unease in the room grew louder. Finally, she stepped back from the diorama and turned to face the mages.

"Sound a full retreat. Get everyone out of Blackmist through the portals, starting with the weakest combatants. Spread them out throughout the other schools to avoid overloading any of them. Anyone who can still fight will join me in holding the line for as long as possible. Act immediately. We have no time to waste. Men, form a defensive ring around Blackmist. Your focus is to hold the enemy back, not defeat them."

*I don't even know if that will work. If Second is after Sylph and me...the siege is only there to lure us out, but what am I supposed to say? I don't know if I trust the queen enough to straight up tell her the full truth.*

Everyone rushed to follow her orders. The mages that could teleport vanished, moving to relay her orders, while the others either ran or used

magic to enhance their speed. Within seconds, the only people remaining in the large tent with the queen and Whisp were Damien, Sylph, and Dredd.

They all stared at the diorama as tiny purple dots flooded away from the center of the base camp. A tiny purple flicker appeared in the middle of the green horde. An instant later, a huge circle of green lights snuffed out around it.

A distant roar ripped through the sky, and the ground trembled slightly beneath their feet.

“What was that?” Damien asked, reaching out with his senses to see if something had arrived close to Blackmist. He found nothing.

“Happenstance, I reckon,” Dredd replied. “Looks like he finally showed up. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him fight at full strength, but the cocky bastard is powerful. Maybe he’ll give the Corruption something to worry about.”

Damien’s memories went back to the first siege on Blackmist. It felt like it had been so long ago, but Happenstance had indeed seemed incredibly powerful. He wasn’t sure how strong the man was compared to him now, but Dredd had respected him, which spoke volumes.

“Happenstance is strong, but he can’t beat that many monsters on his own,” Whisp said. Even as she spoke, green lights blinked on all around the purple dot, replacing the ones that had vanished.

A second purple dot shimmered to life beside him. Several huge lines of the Corruption’s forces vanished in the blink of an eye, centered around the new dot’s position.

“That would be Delph,” the Whisp said, her eyes narrow. “I recognize the pattern of that attack. He used it next to other mages a few too many times. This battle might be the first time he doesn’t inflict collateral damage with it.”

Another huge patch of the Corruption vanished. But even with Happenstance and Delph’s efforts, green lights continued to flicker back on with every passing second. The tide was endless.

“Let’s go,” Damien said, walking toward the exit of the tent. “There’s nothing left for us to do here.”

“Are you going to go straight to the center of the fight? You and Sylph are still students despite your power. You should help hold the line, not dive right into the bloodbath,” the queen said.

Damien paused at the edge of the tent.

“Stay away from my family, please. I’d hate to have to come into conflict with you again.”

Henry’s wings snapped open behind him and Damien Warp Stepped, leaving the camp behind as he and Sylph blurred across the land toward the growing sounds of the fight. They arrived at the edge of the horde just as a massive streak of gray carved through the monsters, vaporizing hundreds of monsters instantly.

The ground trembled as a wave of rippling red light tore through the horde shortly afterward. It had a similar effect on the Corrupted monsters, shredding them to pieces and leaving nothing behind to regenerate.

Damien and Sylph shot into the fight, mowing through the Corruption in the direction of the epicenter of the fighting. Delph and Happenstance stood back to back, the ground around them piled with the smoldering remains of Corrupted monsters.

“Ah. Damien, Sylph!” Delph exclaimed, raising his massive axe in greeting. He hurled the weapon, and it whumped through the air before embedding itself in the chest of a two-story tall giant. Delph snapped his fingers and the axe ripped itself free, slamming back into his hands.

Acid poured from the monster’s chest. It let out a wail, crumpling to the ground. The wound never healed, and it melted into a cracking statue moments later.

“Your students?” Happenstance asked, flicking his fingers and sending a sea of red lightning ravaging through all the monsters around him. “I hate inviting children to parties, Delph.”

“My proteges,” Delph corrected. “Why are you two just standing there? I thought you came to join the fun!”

“Fun?” Damien asked, forming an overloaded gravity sphere inside a large cluster of Corruption. Henry’s mental energy swept over them, severing their connection to the Ether a moment before the spell went off in a massive sphere of black energy, shattering them to pieces and killing the monsters instantly. “We have very different ideas of fun.”

Sylph’s scythes blurred, cutting a Corrupted Devourer Beast to shreds before it could reach Damien. Damien knocked its connection to the Ether away, and the monster crumbled to dust.

“Bah. Do you know how rare it is to get an opportunity like this?” Delph asked. “Enjoy it!”

Damien shook his head. He sent a wave of Void empowered Space magic tearing through the Corruption around him. They fell like wheat in harvest season. Sylph flitted through the carnage, finishing off any of the monsters that had survived his attack.

“The queen sounded a retreat,” Damien said.

“Cool,” Delph replied. His cloak rippled, and Havel leaped off his back, forming into a spike and piercing clean through a Corrupted monster’s throat. Delph swung his axe, and its head rolled to the ground. “I ate eggs for breakfast today.”

“Oh, me, too!” Happenstance exclaimed. “They were a bit undercooked, though. Hard as rock. Looked like it too, actually.”

“Are you sure you didn’t just eat rocks?” Delph ducked under a beam of green Corrupted energy. It shot straight for Happenstance’s back. The dean’s body flickered, and the attack passed through him harmlessly.

“That’s a definite possibility,” Happenstance replied. “That would make a lot of sense, actually.”

Damien nearly laughed despite himself. He and Sylph joined in with the professors, slipping into a flow state as they ravaged the ranks of Second’s army. It was hard to say exactly how much time passed or how many of the Corruption they killed. Damien lost count in the thousands.

The Void continued to power him, providing a near limitless amount of energy. The others weren’t as lucky. Both Delph and Happenstance had started to slow. While their attacks still killed dozens to hundreds of the Corruption at a time, even they had limits. Luckily, Sylph had relied purely on her Corrupted abilities and was somehow still in good shape.

“I’m starting to think that retreat might not be a bad idea,” Happenstance said, struggling to catch his breath. “There are so many of these bastards. Is there any end?”

“Breaks are for chumps,” Delph replied, spinning his axe. Despite his words, his brow was covered in sweat and a few of the monsters had actually managed to land glancing blows on him. “Look at the children. They’re still kicking.”

“Maybe I’m just getting old,” Happenstance said. “They’re young and vibrant. I’m twenty-five. That’s ancient.”

“You’re an idiot,” Delph replied. A rocky fist swung down at him, and he grabbed the air, yanking it down. Gray energy snapped above him, and

the monster shattered into pieces. “This is getting a bit out of hand, though.”

Henry rose from Damien’s back, his wings unfurling to their full size. “I think it’s time I made my own move. Step behind me.”

“What?” Happenstance asked, glancing at him. “Who are you?”

Delph grabbed the dean and leapt, landing behind Henry just as one of the eyes on his wing snapped open. Damien and Sylph both averted their gazes as a violent gale screamed past them.

A thrum rippled through their bodies. All around them, thousands of Corrupted monsters crashed to the ground, their limbs going slack. Henry raised his hands, curling his claws toward his palms.

He cast an enormous net of mental energy out, covering all the monsters he’d just incapacitated. An instant later, jagged spikes of shadow erupted from the ground, each one finding a vital point.

“Neat trick,” Delph said. “Havel, can you do that?”

“No.”

“Bugger,” Delph muttered. “Lame.”

More Corruption poured into the gaps that Henry had torn into their ranks, and they marched onward. Henry let out a low growl.

“This isn’t ideal, Damien. We’ve got a lot of energy, but Second’s army isn’t going anywhere. We need to find a better way to do this.”

“A wise decision.”

All of them spun as the ranks of the Corruption behind them parted, and Second emerged from within them. The bandages covering his body were completely stained green. They whipped around behind him like a nest of furious snakes. His eyes burned like two green flames, hungry to consume all in their path.

“Second,” Damien growled. “What is this? What happened to doing all this to save mortals?”

“You already figured it out,” Second replied, coming to a stop just in front of the Corruption’s line. “And what do you think is happening? I could have crushed this school’s paltry defenses if I wished. There was no true assault. How many of your people even died?”

Damien blinked. Somehow, Second had a point. That wasn’t good news. On top of that, he’d never seen Second this relaxed. He sent his mental energy out, trying to figure out if something was amiss.

“That said, it hardly matters,” Second continued, shaking his head. “They’ll all die anyway—but the death I grant them will be true. I do not *want* to kill them now. Every death is just another soul that might end up suffering in the Void for eternity. The Cycle must be stopped. It is not the mortals I am here for.”

Second’s gaze turned toward Damien.

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re about to find out how it feels when I put my axe through your head,” Delph said.

Second chuckled. “Oh, I’ve felt it. Every single one of my poor men you mowed down. Don’t you feel a bit disturbed, swinging around your companion’s wing like that?”

Damien’s eyes widened. “That’s what the axe is?”

“The Void make excellent artifacts,” Delph replied. “Havel wasn’t using it, anyway. He lost it a few Cycles ago. Imagine our surprise when we found it again. Don’t you feel a bit weird walking around in wet clothes?”

Second’s wrapped mouth split apart in a wide smile. “I look forward to never having to hear your grating humor again. The Cycle ends today.”

“You sure about that?” Delph asked. “The last few fights haven’t gone too well for you, big guy.”

Sylph grabbed Damien’s arm so tightly that he winced in surprise.

“The Ether!” Sylph hissed.

“What?”

“He’s not connected to the Ether,” Sylph said. “He’s connected to—”

“The rest of the Corruption,” Second finished. “I told you of how we were formed, Damien. We are one. *I* am the Corruption. Every single molecule of anguish and suffering. Countless pained souls, all given form for one purpose. Did you really think the Faceless kept resetting the Cycle because of a few paltry monsters that even children could kill?”

The bandages covering him bulged and tore apart as green tendrils wormed their way free.

“We cannot die,” Second hissed. “I cannot die. Not even if I want to. The only way to even bear this eternal suffering was to split into millions of fragments, only keeping consciousness in one of them. That one would serve the needs of the rest, seeking the release that we all deserve.”

“Shit,” Damien breathed. It was obvious—Second had literally been using the exact same strategy to empower the Seed’s they’d just gone up against, but it was too late for him to scold himself now.

His senses brushed over Second, and the sheer force emanating from the man nearly slammed him into the ground. Henry's energy flooded through him, pushing the influence back, and he managed to remain standing.

Ice flooded Damien's blood. Even with Henry's influence he was just barely able to keep himself from dropping collapsing under the sheer weight of Second's immense power. It was nothing like anything he'd ever felt before—and leagues beyond what it should have been.

Damien had always thought Second was powerful, but Moon had been able to match up to him without any issue. That clearly wasn't the case anymore, and it only took Damien a moment to realize what had changed.

Second didn't feel like just a single source of energy. It was like hundreds of thousands of individual mental blows, each one raining down on his shoulders with increased pressure the longer he was in Second's presence.

“Every single Corrupted monster that we've killed—”

“Has returned to me,” Second finished. “Did you truly think I would throw my soldiers away so pointlessly? That I would let my Seeds crumble, unsprouted, just to stall you for a few more minutes? The power is not in the body, Damien Vale. It is in the soul, and I have simply been recollecting them. We shall all bear the awareness of pain for just a little longer. Come, Damien Vale. Today, you will die. Today, the Cycle ends.”

CHAPTER

# TWENTY-NINE

“You’re talking a lot of shit for someone who hasn’t managed to win a single fight yet,” Delph said, digging his fingers into the air before him. Gray energy warped around his fingers, and he ripped his hand downward.

The air shattered, splitting into fragments all around Second. Green energy flickered around the man and Delph’s spell passed through him, ravaging the ranks of the Corruption behind him.

Second laughed. He raised his hands into the air. Green spores poured out from between his bandages, rapidly filling the air like fog and rolling out toward them. Anything they touched melted to green slag instantly.

Henry curled his fingers and drew an enormous amount of Ether into himself. A massive purple eye snapped open in the air above them, blocking out the sky. Countless small portals to the Void snapped open, swallowing the Corrupted energy before it could touch anything else.

“I’ll keep him from melting everyone and make sure the other Corruption can’t regenerate,” Henry said, his voice taut with concentration. “Don’t expect me to be able to do it for long, though. I’m just one Void creature, not the whole damn legion. Second is beyond me. We need to figure out a different way to fight him, because if we keep as we are, we’re going to lose.”

A green tendril erupted from Second’s stomach and thrust into the ground like a sickly root, bulging and twisting as it punched into the earth. Sylph shoved Damien out of the way moments before a green spike covered with dripping acid shot out beneath him.

It sprouted, shooting out in every direction and forcing Sylph and Delph to dive out of the way to avoid getting impaled. More roots wiggled free of

Second's bandaged body, their tips turning to jagged blades. They spun around him, forming a forest of deadly, acid covered weapons.

"**Incinerate.**" Damien commanded, grabbing his staff from the Void. Grayscale washed over the world, and a sheet of black flame washed from his hands with a roar, completely enveloping Second.

Air rushed as the Void empowered flame swallowed everything it touched, leaving a vacuum behind. It faded away, leaving only two smoldering stumps where Second's legs had been.

Bandages whipped up from the ground, and Second rebuilt himself by the time the last smoldering ashes had fallen to the ground. His body rippled as green growths pushed their way back out from within him. They erupted outward in every direction, splattering acid over the scorched battlefield.

Henry enveloped Damien and Sylph in a black sphere moments before the Corrupted vines could hit them. It sizzled as they wound around the magic, trying to squeeze them out of it. A pulse of purple energy erupted from Henry's chest, passing through the shield harmlessly before connecting with the vines.

They burst apart, falling to the ground in a fine mist. Henry released the shield, and Sylph vanished. She reappeared behind Second, her scythes carving into his body before Damien even saw her move.

Sharp vines burst from the wounds she'd made, forcing Sylph to dance back. By the time her feet were on the ground, Second's wounds had healed again. She blinked, raising a hand to her cheek. Despite her speed, one of the vines had left a thin cut on it.

Happenstance took that moment to strike. Red energy enveloped his body, and he bounded forward, appearing before Second and driving a fist into his skull. Second's head popped, splattering acid everywhere.

A vine erupted from his neck and whipped around Happenstance's arm. The dean flared with Ether, but he was half a second too slow. His arm split from his body and thumped to the ground as the vine carved clean through flesh and bone.

Happenstance sent a wave of rolling red lightning into Second and threw himself back, rolling to avoid another whipping vine. He staggered as he came up, blood pouring from the wound. Gritting his teeth, Happenstance pressed his other hand to the stump of his arm. Lightning

crackled, and he cauterized the wound, adding more burnt flesh to the acrid smells filling the air.

The Corruption around them surged forward. Damien thrust his hands out, forming dozens of Void-empowered gravity spheres in a circle. They all went off as one, splitting the air with a loud *crack* as stone shattered and monsters were torn to shreds.

Delph charged at Second. Vines erupted in a wall before the professor, then wrapped around him in a huge dome. They thudded to the ground as his axe carved through them, and Delph launched out from within the dome.

He swung his axe for the base of Second's neck, aiming to split him in half diagonally. Second leaned to the side, narrowly dodging the attack. With the same move, he drove a hand into Delph's chest.

Green light flashed, and Delph's armor let out a metallic squeal. He launched backward, punching clean through several Corrupted monsters and vanishing into the horde as they collapsed on him.

"He'll be fine," Henry snarled as Damien turned to move after him. "Focus on the problem."

"The Voidling is correct. Your attention is far too split, but I cannot blame you. After all, you're just a single mortal, while I am all of them," Second said, thrusting his hands forward. His bandages unraveled, reaching out for Damien. They vanished into a black hole as Damien cast Devour and let the spell snap shut, severing the bandages.

Second snarled, yanking his hands back. What remained of his bandages rewound around his hands, but his green-tinged fingertips were left bare. Second thrust his hands into the air above him. A sickly green rune circle erupted above him. Sylph narrowed her eyes and blurred, slamming her hand into his stomach.

The rune circle vanished, and Sylph vaulted backward. A vine still caught her in the chest, carving a bloody furrow. She skidded to a stop beside Damien, the wound already sealing.

"No using Ether for you," Sylph said. "It would be rude to try to freeze me out of the fight."

A loud explosion rocked the ground. Corrupted monsters flew into the air, and Delph charged out from within the horde, his axe burning with Void energy. Happenstance sent another wave of red lightning coursing over Second in an attempt to distract him.

Second ignored it completely, turning to face Delph as the professor appeared before him. He took the axe to the chest and grabbed Delph's shoulders as they both crashed to the ground. Vines slithered out of his hands, punching into the professor's shoulders and back.

Delph rolled off Second, staggering as he rose to his feet. The wound the axe had left on Second's chest sizzled, Void energy rising off it. Slowly, Second rose to his feet. Delph stumbled and coughed into his fist, splattering blood across it.

"You might need to find healing," Second wheezed. "My acid is not compatible with mortal life. Then again, feel free to keep fighting. You'll join me eventually—you can just choose if you want to do it now or later."

Delph's response was to bring his axe down on Second's head. Bandages shot to block the attack, but it carved through them and split Second straight down the middle. Black fire raced along the wound, but it sputtered out.

Second's body started to knit itself back together, letting out squelching pops. Sylph tackled Delph out of the way as a vine burst from the ground behind him, nearly impaling him through the back of his head.

She blurred, dragging him back to Damien and Henry. Happenstance glanced over at them, his face slightly pale from blood loss.

"I don't suppose any of you have literally any idea how to defeat this... thing?" Happenstance asked. The Corruption pressed closer, and he sent a wave of lightning screaming over them, frying the nearest ones.

"I'm focused on keeping everything we kill from regenerating and suppressing the Corrupted magic," Henry snarled. "If I stop, it'll melt through your weak mortal fleshbags like nothing. Even Sylph isn't going to be able to handle that long."

"If Second has always been this strong, why didn't he try to do this before?" Damien asked. "It does not make sense."

"He never had this many Corrupted monsters on the Mortal Plane," Henry replied. "Without them, he can't regenerate like this. I have no way to completely cut him off on my own. He's too powerful."

Delph coughed up blood again. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and straightened, taking a ragged breath. "Havel and I can damage him. It takes him longer to heal from wounds that the Void inflicts."

"Not fast enough," Henry growled. "We need to change our strategy if any of you want to survive. Even I'm at my limits. A few more minutes of

this and we're all dead."

Second's split head reconnected itself, and he shuddered as the last of the Void energy vanished. He rolled his neck and pointed at Damien. Corruption gathered around his fingertip. Before Damien could Warp Step, Delph hurled his axe.

It spun once as it flew through the air, then slammed into Second's head and knocked him to the ground.

"That ought to buy us another few seconds," Delph said, coughing. "Suggestions?"

Damien's hands clenched as he desperately searched, trying to think of anything they could use. His eyes widened slightly as an idea struck him.

*We need to change the fight, and Second brought everything he had here. I can't get rid of every single Corrupted monster on the Mortal Plane. Not in a hundred years of fighting. Second is too powerful here. But...*

"I think I know something that could work."

"Better hurry. He's almost healed, and now he's got Delph's axe," Happenstance said through gritted teeth.

"Sylph, do you remember the panther strategy?" Damien asked as Second rose back to his feet, his head reconnected once more.

Sylph nodded.

"We're doing the reverse."

She blinked, then nodded. Vines erupted all around Second, surging toward them. Damien cut them off with a wall of Void-empowered fire, only leaving a tiny spot open. Sylph dashed through it, blurring as she shot over the vines and slammed into Second. He stumbled back and lashed out at her. Sylph focused all her energy on avoiding the attacks, blurring from spot to spot to keep ahead of Second and only striking whenever he tried to turn his attention away.

Second continued to press toward Damien, using his vines to fend Sylph off and mostly ignoring her. Despite that, as close as she was to Second, it was impossible to avoid all of the vines. If it hadn't been for her Corrupted abilities, she probably would have died several moves into the fight. Instead, what should have been fatal blows sealed over, and she continued to buzz around him.

"You are wasting my time," Second snarled. "If you're so insistent on it, then I'll deal with you first."

He turned his full attention toward Sylph for just an instant. His hand shot out, and he grabbed Sylph by the throat.

“Those are my powers, girl,” Second hissed. “And I know exactly how far they can go without sustenance.”

Sylph thrashed as green energy poured into her. Henry blurred, and the eye in the air above them vanished. The Corrupted magic that had been seeping out from Second, now uncontested, roiled forth once more.

Henry ignored it as he appeared beside Second. His hand carved through the man’s arm, and he grabbed Sylph, teleporting back to Damien—right as Damien finished his work.

Cracked Void runes flared behind Second, forming the moment he was distracted. A jagged portal stretched open. Second noticed it an instant too late. Damien charged, slamming into him. Corrupted magic touched anything that wasn’t covered his mage armor, racking his body with pain.

Luckily, he was used to that.

Both of them flew into the portal. Henry and Sylph dashed through right after them, and the spell snapped shut.

If Second was too powerful to fight with all the Corruption right beside him, and there was nothing they could do to actually destroy the Corruption without having their power feed right back into Second, then the best thing he could do would be to force Second to fight him in a spot where there were no Corruption to draw on.

Damien and Second landed in the snow, skidding across it. Pushing the agony back, Damien threw himself away from Second and called on the Void as hard as he could. It flowed through his body, pushing the Corruption out before it could do any more damage. He kept calling, using as much of the energy as his body would let him—and then some.

Sylph steadied him as he stumbled. The energy felt like it was chewing through his insides. Henry put a hand on his back as well, drawing some of the Void out and into himself. Second snarled, rising to his feet. Corrupted energy swirled around him like a maelstrom. “Do you think taking me to the Void will stop anything, Damien? I do not need the Ether. You do.”

“But now you can’t attack Delph or Happenstance.”

“You did all this to protect them?” Second asked, letting out a bark of laughter. “You can’t even protect yourself.”

“No,” Damien replied. “I did it to cut you off from the rest of the Corruption. It’s going to be a lot harder to access them from the Void, if you

can access them at all.”

Second chuckled. “Perhaps, but have you forgotten how powerful you already made me? The number of Corrupted souls I have already re-absorbed is beyond what you could ever hope to handle on your own. Even without direct access to the rest of my allies, I am more than you could ever hope to overwhelm. When will you learn that you fight against inevitability?”

“After I lose,” Damien snapped. He’d been hoping the Void would react faster than it had, but that clearly wasn’t going to be the case, so he’d have to buy a little more time.

The Void crackled across his fingertips, and Damien thrust a hand forward, using his other one to drive the butt of his staff into the ground. **“Incinerate.”**

A wave of Void flame erupted from Damien’s palm and screamed through the air. The black energy washed over Second, who enveloped himself in a sea of green energy. Damien clenched his fist shut, stemming the flow of the Void as it started to draw too deeply on him.

Second stood exactly where he had a moment before, completely unharmed. Damien gritted his teeth. Sylph tensed beside him, and Henry gathered the Void at his own hands, but deep down, Damien knew it wasn’t anywhere near enough.

No matter what the three of them did, there was absolutely nothing they could do against Second. Not in their current state, at least. A twinge ran through Damien’s mind, and a relieved smile passed over his face.

“A grin?” Second asked, tilting his head to the side. “Have you accepted inevitability?”

“No, I’ve always been pretty damn bad at that,” Damien said, letting his hands lower. His features set in stone as he tried to keep the fear from showing on his face. “But the whole saving the others bit was a nice cover story, wasn’t it?”

The air rippled between them, and a gray figure stepped out from a warp in space. Their face was completely devoid of any features, and the Void covered them like a cloak.

“Did you know that the Void can feel huge pulls on its energy?” Damien asked as the Faceless turned to face Second.

Second took a step back, his obscured features crinkling in fear. For an instant, Damien saw true fear in the Corrupted man. Then, like a candle in a

hurricane, the fear vanished. Second stopped, a dry laugh replacing everything else.

“That was your strategy? The Faceless cannot act on its own. It is an observer, cursed with power and no way to use it beyond forming slaves. All it can do is send its pawns out to play. How just. The Faceless has arrived to witness the end to its Cycle.”

“I didn’t try to call the Faceless for it to kill you,” Damien said, stepping up to the greatest Void creature. The Faceless turned toward him, already aware of what he was going to ask.

“I called it to finish something we started.” Damien’s chest clenched, and his heart felt like it had forgotten how to beat. The world was a crawl around him. He’d desperately hoped that severing Second from the rest of the Corruption would give them at least a chance to take him out, but that hope had clearly been too optimistic.

Luckily, he had one last trick up his sleeve—and it was well and truly his last trick.

“Damien?” Sylph asked, worry crossing her features. “What are you talking about?”

“It Who Heralds the End of all Light,” Damien said, wishing he could answer Sylph’s question but not confident enough in himself to be able to say anything without losing his resolve, “I wish to end our contract.”

“Your request is granted,” It Who Heralds the End of all Light responded from deep within him.

“What?” Sylph exclaimed. “Damien, what are you—”

The Void exploded with power. Purple stars bloomed in the sky above them, and Herald burst free from Damien’s body, no further limits placed on his power. A massive face formed in the sky, its glowing eyes burning as it stared down.

As soon as it was gone, the Void within Damien started to burn. He felt his organs trying and failing to control the violent energy on their own. He doubled over, coughing up blood. Wisps of black energy rose from his tattoos, but they couldn’t contain the amount of energy he had within him.

“Damien!” Sylph screamed, catching him as he fell. “What are you doing?”

The Faceless pressed a hand to Damien’s back. A bolt of ice shot through his veins, and the world froze. All the pain vanished, and the only

things that still moved on the snowy mountain were Damien and the Faceless.

“I know what you seek to do,” the Faceless said, “but I cannot turn you into a Void creature. That is a process that can only be done once. You overcame it, but without It Who Heralds the End of all Light, your body will fall apart holding this much of the Void. But even if turning you into another Void Creature was possible, you would not be enough to stop the Corruption. It was a noble thought, but one that is utterly wasted.”

“Then, you don’t know what I seek to do at all,” Damien said. “I appreciate the time-freeze, though.”

“If you don’t wish to become one of the Void, then what do you seek? I cannot act. Second is correct.”

“I don’t need you to act,” Damien replied, slipping out from Sylph’s frozen arms and kneeling on the snow. His finger traced through it as he drew a rune circle that had burned into his mind for years. It went a lot faster this time than it had the first. “I need you to make a contract.”

“You will die,” the Faceless said flatly. “Before you can do anything, you will die. A mortal cannot contain the Void itself. I am not even truly alive—you understand this, yes? I am the Void manifest.”

“Pure power given form,” Damien said with a grim nod. “I understand what you are. And I understand that, as you said, no mere Void creature is anywhere near powerful enough to take out Second. He’s every single tortured mortal soul that has ever fallen through the cracks, Faceless. I can’t just have the powers of any Voidling if I want to handle him. I need to have the powers of *the* Void creature.”

“Your soul will be snuffed in the span of an instant. You are nothing more than mortal now, Damien. A bold, desperate mortal. I would promise to remember you, but I suspect that the Void has lost. I will not remember for much longer.”

“Sign the contract or watch the Cycle end. Two options. If it’s already over, what is there to lose? I’d just be one more death in a list of trillions.”

The Faceless cocked its head to the side. Several still seconds passed as the two of them watched each other. Then, slowly, it lowered its hand to the rune circle.

“I, Damien Vale, request to form a contract with the Faceless.”

“I accept,” the Faceless replied. “Goodbye, Damien Vale. It is rare that I meet such bravery, even if it is for naught.”

The world snapped back to motion, and the Faceless vanished. Void energy screamed through the air, spiraling into Damien's body and lifting him into the air. It blew Second's magic to the side as it poured into him.

Wind screamed through the Void, and the mountain shook violently. Damien threw his head back in a wordless scream. Pillars of Void magic surged into his mouth and eyes, filling every part of him.

And then there was silence.

Damien fell to the ground, and the Void went still. Everyone stared at his limp body in disbelief.

Sylph dropped to her knees beside Damien, shaking him gently.

“Damien? Damien?”

He didn’t respond. Sylph shook him harder, tears trickling down her cheeks as she pulled his body closer. “Damien!”

Henry stared at his body, disbelief in his features. He opened his mouth, trying to find words, but nothing came through. For the first time since he had gained his emotions, Henry truly hated them.

He extended a hand toward Damien, nudging him gently. “Hey, what are you doing? You didn’t go and do something stupid, did you?”

“Fool,” Second said, lowering his hands. “But a selfless one. I know your commitment, Damien Vale. No mortal can contain the full strength of the Void. More than any, I know what it does to us. I am sorry that we fought but know that I fought for you. This is over. The Faceless is bound in a corpse. One Void creature is not enough to stop me, It Who Heralds the End of all Light.”

The stars that made up Herald’s face twinkled. “Two. Henry is not a part of me any more than I am a part of him. We are separate.”

“Two are also not enough. There was a reason the Faceless sent six before,” Second said. “And now, not even six would be sufficient. You know this just as well as I. This is over. The Cycle will finally come to an end. If you have even a single spark of love for anything in existence, let this eternal war end. You were mortal, once—even if those memories have been burned. Ruined, just like everything else the Voice touches. I give you one last option to stand aside and join me as I destroy the great torture that is the Cycle. I will put you to rest once it is complete, and all may finally be at peace.”

Sylph’s shoulders trembled, and she pulled Damien tightly to her chest, unable to form any more words. Henry tried to slip into Damien’s shadow

and back into his mind, but it repelled him. There was nowhere to go.

“Damien?” Henry asked, his voice small.

“If you ever cared for the boy, then you’d understand what drives me,” Second snapped. “He was one of infinite. Think of all the other mortals that go through worse as the Void consumes them. Stand out of my way. Now.”

Damien twitched. All of them, even Herald, froze. Every eye turned to Damien as his eyes fluttered open, burning with the intensity of a purple sun.

“How many times do I have to say,” Damien said, slowly rising to his feet as the Void started to gather around his body, “I am more than mortal.”

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# CHAPTER

# THIRTY

Disbelief filled Second's eyes. He took a step backward, his bandages coiling defensively around his feet. "You were able to contain the Faceless because you split half of your soul with the Voidling?"

"Evidently. I'd say the other part is pure spite from you having your goddamn victory speech over what you believed to be my corpse. Don't you have any respect?" Damien took Sylph's hand and gave it a small squeeze.

"Even so," Second snarled, the fear fading from his voice, "you are still half-mortal. The Faceless' power is beyond your full control. You are not enough, Damien Vale. You never were. I am the combined might of every mortal that has been put through the torture that the Faceless perpetuates."

"Yeah?" Damien asked. "Then, I'm the desire of every mortal that lives and will live that doesn't want to get crushed to paste and blown away. You're right that the Cycle is broken, but destroying it even further isn't going to change anything."

Second shook his head. "You and I will never see eye to eye while you still draw breath—but once you have perished, you will see the truth."

His body bulged, white flesh ripping through the bandages covering him. Second screamed, doubling over as Corrupted energy burned around him, pouring into his body from the connections he had to the monsters on the Mortal Plane.

Henry summoned a black dome around all three of them just before a wave of green energy washed over the Void, melting through the snow and eating through stone. Second's body warped and twisted even further, growing until he was several stories tall. Unlike the rest of the Corruption,

his body's proportions remained intact. The only part of his body that remained bandaged was the lower half of his face.

"Enough fighting," Damien said. "There's no point, Second. Stop trying to destroy the Cycle."

"Back your words up with pow—"

A beam of black light leapt from Damien's palm, carving through the middle of Second's body in an instant. It slid forward, nearly falling to the ground before ropy muscle shot out and pulled it back together. A thin black line remained where Damien's magic had cut him, smoldering with Void energy.

"How many Corrupted did you use to survive that attack?" Damien asked. "The Faceless' energy is infinite. I can't run out."

Second let out a dry laugh that turned hysterical as he doubled over, acid welling up from beneath his skin and dripping to the ground with every heave. "Perhaps. But you can still die, and in contracting the Faceless, you have ensured that It Who Heralds the End of all Light will not help you. It will do nothing."

Above them, the twinkling face of Herald looked down at them with its usual indifference.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sylph asked.

"Balance," Henry replied grimly. "That's what the Void was made for. The Faceless never put any requirements in about following it. We were simply made to ensure balance to protect the Mortal Plane. Damien has the powers of the Faceless and can use them without the Faceless' limitations, which means he might be a greater threat than Second."

"You can't be serious," Sylph said, staring up at Herald. "It's the same situation that we had with the queen?"

Second laughed even harder. "The war will never end as things are, Damien Vale. The Cycle *is* war. That is why it must be stopped. The Void will never know peace."

"It is not the same situation," Herald said. The twinkling stars blinked out, spiraling into a pillar of purple light beside Damien. It vanished, taking the form of a middle-aged man with cold features. "I have not been doing nothing. I have been waiting."

A black line carved through the air beside Herald. It split open into a portal, and Moon stepped out, leaning heavily on half of a broken staff with

one hand and pressing the other to his stomach. Behind him came It Who Stills the Seas.

“Hello, Second,” Moon said with a pained laugh. “Pity I could only get one of them to come alive, but I think this should be enough.”

“Moon,” Second breathed, taken aback. “Impossible. You are dead. You are dead so many times over.”

“I couldn’t let myself pass on before the last act,” Moon said. “Sun never would have let me live it down if I ended up fighting for your side after so many years of fighting against it.”

The air trembled as Herald’s energy bore down on all of them, pushing against Second’s immense influence. Sylph stood slightly straighter, but it still wasn’t enough to completely repress Second. Even with Herald’s power, he was still far beyond anything that a single Creature could oppress.

“And I have been watching,” Herald continued. He lowered to one knee. “I bore witness to the actions of the mortal Damien Vale, who has bonded with the Faceless. He serves the interests of the Mortal Plane.”

Damien’s eyes flicked to It Who Stills the Seas. The old man stared back at him, then slowly inclined his head.

“Herald is unwarped by emotion and knows your true self more than any other. I will fall in line. The alternative is to let the Cycle be irreparably shattered, which goes against everything I was formed for. The Corruption must be destroyed.”

“That makes six of us, if I count correctly,” Damien said to Second. “And one is the Faceless. How’s that for an even playing field?”

Second’s gaze darted between them. He took another step backward, the flames in his eyes burning with fury.

“The Corruption will persist, even if I fall,” Second said. “As long as the Void exists, our suffering will never end. There will be another. The very nature of the Cycle is infinite, and I am amongst it, no matter how much I wish to escape. So long as you exist, so long as the Void destroys the very mortals it should exist to protect, there will *always* be another.”

“No,” Damien said, shaking his head. “There won’t be.”

The black sky above them flickered. Within the endless sea of stars, a sun bloomed, and the endless night was washed away. The snow melted away, and vibrant grass sprouted to take its place. Warm light bore down on all of them.

“I possess the full powers of the Faceless. The Void is what I will it to be,” Damien said. “The Faceless could not act, but I can.”

Second froze. It was only for an instant, but an emotion other than hatred and fear appeared in Second’s expression.

It was confusion, with the faintest tinge of hope. The emotion vanished almost instantly after it had appeared, but Damien could feel that the hook had set itself.

“You are not the Faceless. You merely control it,” Second murmured, as if trying to convince himself. Before the words had even left his mouth, he shook his head. “No. It is not possible. You will become the Faceless. Even if you could withstand its power thus far, it is impossible for a mere mortal—”

“How many damn times do I have to say this?” Damien demanded, cutting Second off and driving his staff into the ground to punctuate his point. Void energy swirled around him in a disk. “I am no mortal, Second. Henry and I exchanged half of our souls with each other. Half of me is mortal, and the other half is Void. I am the bridge that you need. There will not be another one of you because I will not permit any more Corruption to come into being.”

“And how do you propose that?” Second snarled. “How will you keep mortal souls from slipping into the cracks in the Void as they transition to reincarnation? How will you keep even a single one from falling through? The Void beings cannot be trusted. Even if you are more, they—aside from Henry—are not. Your promises are empty.”

“I will escort them myself.”

Second’s hands lowered slightly. “What?”

“I will escort every mortal soul that passes on,” Damien said. “I feel the Cycle. I feel the souls that were pushed off the Plane of the Dead before the Cycle could reclaim them. I can feel you, Second. Every screaming mortal life, longing for release. Longing for the freedom that you—not I—refuse to grant them.”

“Lies,” Second murmured, but his words were weaker than before.

“The Void interconnects everything. It is the stitching that holds the planes together, and it is the path in which all enter and leave the Mortal Plane. I can guide souls through the Cycle and ensure that they do not become lost within the Void. Do you really think that your way will truly fix anything, Second? You may stop new mortals from falling through the

cracks for millennia upon millennia but, eventually, the planes will become overpopulated once more. The Cycle is more than you—or I—can completely rule over, Second. The Void are the keepers of the Cycle, not the owners of it. And what of all the existing souls in suffering? Will you continue as you are? I can stop the pain. Unlike you, I can truly change the Cycle, because I am more than the Void.”

“Is such a thing possible?” Second demanded. “If it were, why has it not been done?”

“Because the Faceless is not a living being. It could not act,” Damien said, pressing a hand to his chest. “It was simply the manifestation of Void magic, and I believe it was born in the similar to how the Corruption was—but it was pure magic mashed together rather than souls.”

“And you truly believe you possess the power to escort every single mortal soul?” Second demanded. “No Voidling has such strength.”

“I am not a Voidling. Through the Faceless, I am the Void—and more. It will do as I will.”

Second’s eyes burned into Damien’s. “How do I know?”

“Because I will start with you.”

“I am not a single soul.”

“You were not,” Damien corrected. “Now you are, even if you are broken. I cannot fix that, but I can ensure it never happens again. I can put you to rest.”

“If you do not lie, then you will wander the Void for eternity. Alone. Can you even comprehend the meaning of that?”

A tiny smile passed over Damien’s lips. Sylph squeezed his hand and Henry walked up to stand beside him, his wings coiling to shrink into his back.

“I will not be alone.”

A warm breeze rustled through the cold void. Seconds passed in complete silence as Second watched Damien, his acid-filled eyes boring into him. His gaze drifted from Damien to Henry, and then to Sylph.

Second’s body rippled, shrinking back down to his human size. He slowly walked up to Damien, never breaking eye contact. Sylph stiffened, but nobody moved until he stood directly before them.

“Show me your proof.” Second’s voice cracked slightly. “Show me that you can end this. And know that—if you are wrong, and if I survive this,

there will be no place in any of the Planes that I do not come for you. That we do not come for you.”

Damien raised his free hand and placed it on Second’s chest. Acid sizzled against his palm, but he felt no pain. The endless expanse of the Void swirled at the back of Damien’s mind. Every single pathway throughout the universe, all interconnected.

And, simultaneously above and dispersed throughout everything, was the Cycle. It was the Void, and it was more. Damien reached out to it, and warmth greeted him. Gentle relief passed through his body, traveling down his arm and out into Second’s chest.

“Rest,” Damien said. “You will come for nobody, because you have already been on watch for far too long. Re-enter the Cycle and be at peace.”

Second stiffened. His eyes went wide. The bandages on the lower half of his face crumbled and blew away, carried by the gentle wind. Beneath them was the faintest sliver of a smile.

The flame in Second’s eyes sputtered and vanished. For an instant, Damien stared into two brown eyes, devoid of pain for the first time in countless eons. Then Second was gone, his body crumbling to white dust.

Silence reigned in the Void, broken only by the rustling grass. Moon approached Damien, leaning heavily on the broken staff. His arms trembled as he pushed himself to stand upright so he stood nose to nose with Damien.

“My turn,” Moon said. “If I’ve even got any soul left. I reckon you got most of it, all things considered.”

“I think there’s still a sliver,” Damien replied with a soft smile. “Thank you, Moon. Is this how you saw things going?”

“Saw? I’ve been flying by the seat of my pants for the last few Cycles,” Second said with a coughing laugh. “I was out of time, but it looks like that was what we needed. About time to let some young bastard take over, eh? Too bad it’s still me.”

They both laughed. Those words felt far too insignificant for everything that Moon had done, but the knowing look in the other man’s eyes told Damien that he understood, nonetheless. Second hadn’t been one with the Faceless, but he’d watched over the Cycle as best as he could for countless years.

Damien was pretty sure he could have repaired the damage to Moon, but he knew without even having to ask that Moon didn’t want that. He’d been alive for too long, and it wasn’t life that he sought. It was rest.

Damien pressed his hand to Moon's chest and let the Cycle take the exhausted man into its arms.

"I wonder if the Void enter the Cycle, too," Moon breathed, the light in eyes fading like a candle reaching the end of its wick after its vigil through the long night. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long, Sun."

Moon crumbled away. The broken staff that had been supporting him pitched forward, but it vanished before it hit the ground. All that remained were his ragged clothes. Deep in the back of his mind, Damien felt something shimmer.

A golden star blinked in the distance, cutting through the darkness of the Void like a knife. And then, as quickly as it had appeared, it vanished.

*It looks like Sun was waiting around after all. I wonder who Sun was. Was it another Void being? Or someone to Moon as Sylph is to me? I suppose I'll never know. It wasn't my place, but for anyone to have waited within the Void for this long...I hope the Cycle keeps them together.*

"What about the Corruption on the Mortal Plane?" Sylph asked, swallowing heavily.

"They went with Second," Damien replied. "Herald, Seas—we will speak in time. For now, seek out any others that remain in the Void and inform them of our new purpose. The Cycle must be changed if it is to continue."

The two nodded and vanished, leaving Damien with Sylph and Henry on the sunny mountain.

"Henry, quick question," Sylph said. "How long is the Corruption you fixed me with going to keep me alive?"

"It repairs any damage you take, and aging is just slow damage. You've also got bits of Void floating around in you to keep you in one piece. Second had no more control over your Corruption than I do, so it wasn't purged with his death. If you want to die, I'd start looking for better ways."

"Good," Sylph said, tightening her grip around Damien's hand. "Eternity is a pretty long time."

"I think, between the three of us, it should be bearable," Damien replied.

Henry started to nod but froze when Damien pulled Sylph close and pressing his lips against hers. He buried his face in his hands with a groan.

"I hope that sometimes it's just the two of you, because I'm going to have Damien dust me if that's what you're going to be doing the whole

time.”

“Come on,” Damien said, pulling back from Sylph and winking at Henry. “The Void needs a massive makeover if we’re going to be sticking around.”

“I suggest starting by finding me a very healthy supply of goats,” Henry said. “Eternity is sounding like a very long time.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” Damien said with a grin. A portal opened before them, and with it came the path to a promised future.

They stepped into it as one.

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# EPILOGUE

DELPH & DREDD

Delph leaned against the hilt of his axe, looking over the remains of the battlefield surrounding Blackmist. It had been several months since the Corruption had completely vanished, and the kingdom was somehow in more chaos than it ever had been before.

The queen was trying to figure out what had happened, the nobles were all vying to try and increase their power, and most of the mages were just happy that the casualties had been so incredibly low despite the scale of the threat.

Delph, on the other hand, was bored out of his mind. He let out his tenth sigh of the hour. Havel slipped down from his shoulders and took the form of a small, featureless humanoid. Delph glanced down at his companion and raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

“You’ve been sitting around for days. Aren’t you going to do something?”

“I *was* doing something,” Delph replied. “Now what am I supposed to do? All the fun is over. My students grabbed it and shunted it off into the Void. Greedy little bastards wanted it all for themselves.”

Havel formed an eyebrow on his flat face and cocked it.

“What?” Delph asked.

The eyebrow rose higher.

“Stop that.”

Havel extended his forehead, giving the eyebrow more room to travel. Delph punted his companion, but his foot passed clean through Havel's rippling gray body. He cursed and threw his hands up into the air.

"Fine. I miss them. They were fun!" Delph exclaimed. "What do you want me to say? It was the first time I've enjoyed myself since the frontlines. Don't you know how long it's been since I found someone with the potential to get stronger than me? And I found *two* of them. Just my luck that they both vanish right when they get to the point where I could finally have a good fight. Both!"

"They defeated the Corruption," Havel said. "At that level of strength, you weren't going to be much of a match anymore."

"I'd take a humiliating defeat over *this*."

"This is what we wanted," Havel said. "The Mortal Plane is safe. That's what mattered."

"What's the point of living if there's no enjoyment in it?" Delph demanded. "Do you think little monsters like that grow on trees? I could try to fight the queen, but she's got so many clingers tailing her that I'd never get a chance to really enjoy myself."

"If I didn't already know there was nothing left to be saved, I'd have some serious concerns for your mental health," Havel grumbled. "If you're going to keep moping around, at least let me go somewhere. I'm bored."

"No. If I'm going to suffer, then we're going to do it together."

Before Havel could respond, a crackling red portal shimmered to life behind them. Delph didn't even bother turning around as Dredd stepped out from within it, the bags under his eyes even deeper than they'd ever been.

"Oh, brother," Delph grumbled.

"Was that supposed to be a joke?" Dredd asked. "Because that was bad, even for you."

"What do you want? I was just getting into the middle of my daily complaints to my companion. I've been practicing the speech in my head for a few hours, so I'd prefer to avoid interruptions."

Dredd snorted. "Are you done?"

"No, but I don't imagine you'll be leaving until you say what's on your mind. You might as well get it out. Why are you here?"

"Not to chat," Dredd replied. "I'm making a delivery."

"A delivery? Someone got me a gift?"

“Not exactly,” Delph replied with a small smile. “Be seeing you, Delph.”

He stepped back into the portal, vanishing. It rippled, and Whisp stepped out from within it. The portal shimmered closed behind her. Delph wrinkled his nose.

“This is the worst gift I’ve ever gotten.”

Whisp grunted. “Likewise.

She pulled her heavy gauntlets off and tossed them to the ground. Each one landed with a *crash*, leaving a small dent in the earth. Shadows rippled up, forming into a small stool. She sat down heavily.

“This is my brooding spot. Go find your own.”

“No,” Whisp replied, pulling a large flask out from beneath her cloak. She popped the top off and took a long swig from it. After a moment, she held it out to Delph. He blinked, then took it.

He took a quick sniff and wrinkled his nose in distaste. Delph took a drink and his eyes widened slightly. He took another sip, then handed it back.

“That’s a lot better than I expected.”

“I confiscated Happenstance’s pay since he’s not around to contest it,” Whisp said with a smirk. “This cost half a year of it.”

“A special occasion, then.”

“No. This is what I spend all of his money on,” Whisp replied, taking another swig. She offered the flask to Delph again, and this time he took it without hesitation. They drained it within the next minute.

“Speaking of Happenstance, where’d he run off to?” Delph asked. “I haven’t seen him since the war ended.”

“He ran off to the Wastes again,” Whisp said with a heavy sigh. “He’s looking for a new arm.”

“Can’t say I didn’t see that coming,” Delph admitted. “So why are you here?”

Whisp shrugged. “Got fed up with dealing with politics, and I needed something from you.”

“At least you’re honest about it. I’m still not doing it.”

“I haven’t even told you what it is.”

“I’m refusing on principle.”

Whisp let out a short bark of laughter. “Gods, I hate you.”

“Likewise,” Delph said. “Spit it out. What do you want?”

“We’ve got a whole year of new students that need professors,” Whisp replied. “And there are some coming in who have their fair share of talent. I don’t need it wasted by some talentless hack.”

Delph cocked an eyebrow. “You’re calling me talented?”

“Don’t milk it. I’ve already hired several new teachers who show promise.”

“Kat?”

Whisp nodded. “She’s talented.”

“Of course, she is,” Delph said with a scoff. “Trained her myself.”

“I’d say you did a little more than that. Why won’t you tell anybody that she’s your daughter?” Whisp asked. “I only just found out myself. I knew you were married, but...”

“She’s not Mel’s daughter. She’s adopted,” Delph said. “And she doesn’t need me hanging over her. She needs to make her own path.”

“Don’t you think it’s been long enough? She said it’s been years since you last really spent time together, the war notwithstanding.”

Delph wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Are you trying to be a counselor? I don’t need family advice from an alcoholic.”

“Says the madman.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Delph admitted. “It has been a while. She’s gotten strong, but I know myself enough to know that I’m a poor influence.”

“And any of the rest of us aren’t?” Whisp asked with a chuckle. “Better a poor influence than none.”

Delph studied Whisp for a few moments. “Those students you mentioned. They any good?”

“They show some promise.”

Delph rubbed his chin. “I see. How’s their cardio?”

“Abysmal.”

Delph pushed himself off the axe. He pulled it out of the ground and slid it back into its home in its book, then snapped it shut.

“I suppose I’ll have to do something about that.”

# EPILOGUE

NOLAN

“I’m sorry for the long wait,” Nolan said, rising from his plain wooden chair and rubbing his back. “Things have been far busier than I expected.”

“It’s no problem,” Quinlan replied, looking around the Gray’s throne room despite herself. The tall walls were covered with beautiful murals and flowing designs that were fit for a king more than a noble house.

Behind Nolan sat a huge, broken throne. It was split down the middle, and a large sword jutted out from the center of the seat, stopping anyone from ever using it as a chair. Nolan’s plain chair stood out in stark contrast to the rest of the room.

“Did you not get a chance to replace your chair yet?” Alina asked.

“Alina!” Quinlan scolded. “Be polite.”

Nolan chuckled. “It’s okay. No, this chair is permanent. It’s a good chair. More than functional. The throne is there to remind me of the past. You didn’t come all this way to talk about my decorations, though. How can I help you?”

“We need a bit of a favor,” Quinlan admitted. “I’m looking for funding.”

“Funding for what?” Nolan asked.

“A new mage school!” Alina exclaimed.

Nolan choked. “What?”

“Alina, please,” Quinlan grumbled. “It’s not exactly a new mage school. That would be ludicrous.”

“Please, elaborate,” Nolan said.

“Mountain Hall is...problematic,” Quinlan said. “The way it treats students is unacceptable. The queen doesn’t care since they produce strong mages, but it’s agony for everyone in the school. Students shouldn’t be forced to live like that.”

“I don’t disagree,” Nolan said. “But what does that have to do with starting a new school?”

“We don’t want to start a new one,” Quinlan corrected. “We want to— Let’s see. How do I put this? We’re trying to—”

“Overthrow the current leadership and take control of it,” Alina said with a bright smile. “And since you did the whole takeover of House Gray, we figured you might be willing to help.”

Quinlan ran a hand through her hair and shook her head. “That’s one way to put it, I suppose.”

Nolan pursed his lips. “You realize that the Mage schools are officially funded by the queen, right? Acting against them is making a move against her.”

“That didn’t stop you from sticking your father,” Alina said, making a stabbing motion.

Quinlan grabbed Alina and pushed her sister behind herself. “Please, ignore her. We’ll just be going. Sorry.”

“Hold on,” Nolan said, raising a hand. “I know Damien trusted both of you. Are things at Mountain Hall really that bad?”

“Worse,” Quinlan said darkly. “It needs to be stopped, but I don’t want to cause you trouble with the queen. This was a poor idea. Please, forget you saw us. I’d appreciate if you didn’t tell her what we were up to.”

“Wait just a minute. What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Why?” Quinlan asked suspiciously.

“You can’t come here asking for help, and then ask me why when I want to know what your plan is.”

Quinlan didn’t say anything for a few moments. Alina nudged her in the side, and she relented. “Our friends Venus and Xil are currently in Mountain Hall, looking for proof that their Dean has been cheating the queen out of taxes in addition to abusing his powers and allowing mages to be killed and stunted for the slightest issues. When we find it, we’re going to challenge the headmaster to a fight and kill him.”

“I see,” Nolan said slowly. “I was aware of the unjust conditions in Mountain Hall, but I did not know he was cheating the queen.”

Quinlan cleared her throat. “As far as I’m aware, he isn’t.”

“Ah,” Nolan said. “I see. You’re going to falsify the evidence and kill him before anyone can prove otherwise?”

Quinlan nodded.

“You’re confident you can defeat a dean?”

Quinlan nodded again. “Together with Xil and Venus, yes. Alina also has a powerful companion, but she isn’t well trained. If we can surprise him, I’m confident we can take him out. Rumors are that he avoided fighting the Corruption because he wasn’t confident in his own abilities.”

Before any of them could speak again, the door to the audience hall creaked as Loretta stepped inside. She glanced from Nolan to the others, then walked up to stand by his side.

“You know, when I decided to stick around, I wasn’t expecting you to get involved in another coup quite so quickly. Do you not get bored of them?”

“I hadn’t agreed to anything yet!” Nolan protested, but he couldn’t stop his eyes from lighting up at the sight of her. He moved to the far side of his chair so Loretta could sit down, leaning against his side.

“Sure,” Loretta said, a knowing look in her eyes as a small smile flickered across her lips. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. Please, continue.”

“I think we’ve already made our case,” Quinlan said. “We shouldn’t bother you any longer. I know you and Nolan have been through a lot. We’ve got other resources, so we can look elsewhere.”

“Hold on.” Nolan drummed his fingers on the sides of his legs. “I’m not entirely sure this is a wise idea. Even if you could take out the Dean, the other teachers would put up a lot of resistance, and I’d have the queen breathing down my neck for insolence. This is literally a direct attack on her. If you failed to kill the dean, he would almost certainly kill you. Alina’s companion—what is it?”

“It’s from the Plane of Darkness,” Alina said meekly. “I can’t show you him, though. He only wants to come out if he needs to fight to protect me.”

Nolan blinked. He stared at Alina, emotions washing over his face like paint over a canvas. Then, he doubled over, laughing so hard that he couldn’t breathe. Quinlan and Alina glanced at each other in concern.

“I’m sorry,” Nolan said, waving his hand and wiping a mirthful tear from his face once he got control of himself. “You just reminded me of

something that I heard a long time ago. I'm going to take that as a sign. Loretta..."

"Don't even bother asking," Loretta said with a wry smile. "I knew what I was getting into when I stuck around."

Nolan grinned and turned his gaze back to Quinlan. "I'll help you. I'm sure Reena would have liked to as well, but she's currently out handling some diplomatic relations. No matter. She'll just have to hear the story. This won't last long enough for her to need to get involved."

"What do you mean?" Quinlan asked.

Nolan rose from his chair and extended his hand toward the throne behind him. The massive sword jutting out of it shuddered, then leapt through the air and slammed into his palm. "You won't need any of your plots. On my authority as the head of House Gray, I believe the Dean of Mountain Hall plots treason against the queen. We will act immediately and with full force to ensure the safety of the kingdom. Any fault or consequence from our actions will fall solely on my shoulders."

Quinlan's eyes widened. "Are you sure? We just needed some undercover enforcement."

"I am. You're correct that Mountain Hall needs to be dealt with, and the queen doesn't have time to do it herself. It is my duty as the head of a noble house to act," Nolan said firmly. His eyes went glassy for a moment as his mind drifted into the past. "And I've got a lot of favors to pay off. I think that this is a good place to start. Mountain Hall will have new leadership by dawn tomorrow."

# EPILOGUE

YUI, MARK, AND ELANIA

The ground trembled. Dark clouds hung low in the sky, lit by blood red light from below. An earthshattering roar split the air and a massive Devourer Beast reared onto its hind legs, blood pouring from a massive wound on its chest.

Mark's sword flashed, batting away one of its huge paws as it swiped at him in an attempt to retaliate. Red mist surrounded him, the form of a ghostly demon rising in the air above him.

“Pattern Four!” Elania yelled. Golden energy gathered in a sphere in the air above the Devourer Beast, and bolts of energy rained down from it. They forced the monster to lurch to the side, granting Mark an opening for half a second.

He blurred, driving his sword into the beast's side. The demon above him did the same, splitting the massive creature in two with a single blow. It crashed to the ground, thrashing in its death throes.

“Yes!” Elania exclaimed, jogging up to Mark. “We got it!”

“It wasn't strong enough,” Mark muttered. “But that was better than the last one. Good job.”

Elania rolled her eyes. “Nothing will ever be strong enough for you, Mark.”

“Don't sell yourself short. You're not half bad anymore,” Mark said, clapping her on the shoulder. “Next time, let's find two Devourer Beasts.”

Elania flicked him in the forehead. “No. This was a detour, remember? We're on a job for Princess Yui and Carson. We need to find them a wyvern

so Carson can get some armor made. He's trying to make a good impression on the queen."

"I still don't see why he isn't getting the wyvern himself," Mark muttered.

"Because Princess Yui is currently trying to teach him every single aspect of how to act in royal court," Elania replied with a shudder. "At least, that's what Dredd told me when he gave me the mission. You should be thankful. After you shredded all the monsters from our last job, nobody wanted to hire us."

Mark grunted. "As long as I've got you and things to kill, I don't care."

Elania rolled her eyes. "I can't tell if you're a romantic or an idiot."

"Talented is the word I would use."

"Well, then, Mr. Talented, how about we go find that wyvern? Let's make a bet. If we can kill the wyvern without completely ruining its scales, I'll convince Dredd to spar against you again. He promised me a favor for taking this job on at such short notice."

Marks' eyes lit up. "Now you're talking. Done deal. After this, we should get dinner. It's a special occasion."

"It is?" Elania asked, blinking. "For what?"

"It's been two months since you realized how strong I am."

Elania rolled her eyes. "You mean when we started dating? That had nothing to do with how strong you were. And nobody celebrates two month anniversaries."

"Why not?"

"I'm not getting into this one again," Elania said with a sigh. "I'm still down for dinner, though."

"You should have just said that from the start," Mark said, shaking his head. "I still don't get people. Everyone should spend a few years lost in the wilderness to get their brains working right."

"Wyvern," Elania reminded Mark.

"Right. Let's go kill stuff."

# EPILOGUE

HILLA

“It’s going far smoother than I had expected,” Dredd said, nursing the cup of tea before him. “I had no idea Whisp and Delph could actually get along. It’s...concerning to watch, to say the least.”

Hilla laughed. “Maybe Dove is finally ready to settle down again. He certainly needs someone to try to tone him down a little.”

“I don’t think anyone can control my brother,” Dredd said, taking another sip from his cup. “This tea is delicious, by the way. I can’t say how much I’ve missed your cooking. It’s the only thing on the frontlines I actually enjoyed.”

Hilla smiled at him from across the kitchen. “I’ve already told you this, but you’re welcome to come by any time. It’s been too long, and the house feels so much emptier than normal.”

“Ah,” Dredd said, savoring the word for a moment. He cleared his throat, glancing around the kitchen. “So, are you and Stormsword—”

“Derrod is no longer allowed in this house or city,” Hilla said flatly. She poured some batter from a bowl into a pan, then glanced back at Dredd. “I believe he’s off with the queen. I had our marriage annulled. I’ve heard that she’s reconsidering her trust in him after that debacle during the war, and good riddance. That pathetic excuse for a man was not the man I thought I knew.”

“I shouldn’t have brought up bad memories,” Dredd said. “I apologize. I did not mean to cause you discomfort.”

“Don’t you fret about it,” Hilla said with a dismissive wave. “Honestly, with how little Derrod was home, I haven’t really been married for years.”

Dredd nodded absentmindedly. “Yes. I suppose it must be a relief to some degree. I’m certain you’ll have no trouble finding someone far more deserving of your care.”

Hilla cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, I think you’re quite right. I’ll have no trouble at all.”

Dredd finished his cup of tea and sighed in satisfaction. “I still don’t understand how you can make leaf water taste this good.”

“Perhaps you’ll never know,” Hilla replied. She glanced out the window, then turned to the stove and slid the pancake she’d just finished off onto a small stack. “Forgive me, but I have a meeting that I have to get to. They should be arriving shortly.”

“Of course,” Dredd said, pushing his chair back and rising to his feet. “Thank you for having me again. I have far too little interaction with people I can tolerate these days.”

“I know what you mean,” Hilla said with a wry grin. “Same time next week?”

“I would be honored,” Dredd said with a smile. “Take care of yourself.”

A portal snapped open behind him, and he stepped into it, vanishing from her kitchen. No more than a few moments later, a streak of black energy carved through the air. It split open, and a man emerged from within it.

He wore tarnished black metal armor and a ragged black cloak. Glowing purple tattoos covered all the open skin on his body, and faint wisps of Void energy curled off his body and rose into the air like smoke.

Hilla set the stack of pancakes on the table, then topped them with a handful of blueberries. The man extended, a hand and a small portal opened in the air. A tiny black tendril wormed out from within it, snagging two of the pancakes and pulling them through.

“For Sylph and Henry,” Damien explained. “They’re watching things for a bit.”

“Tell them I said thank you. I’m glad you could make it.”

“As am I. We’ve got a lot to catch up on, Mom.”

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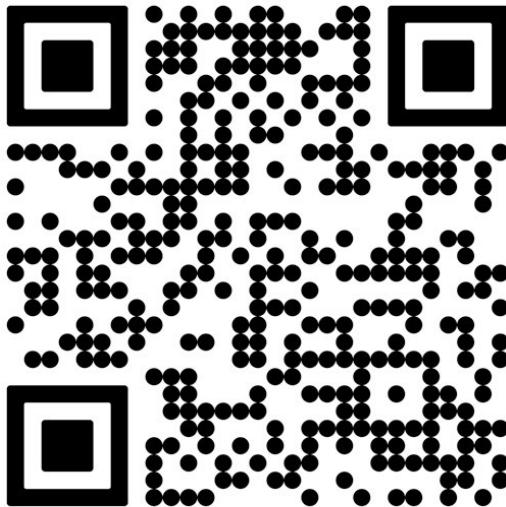
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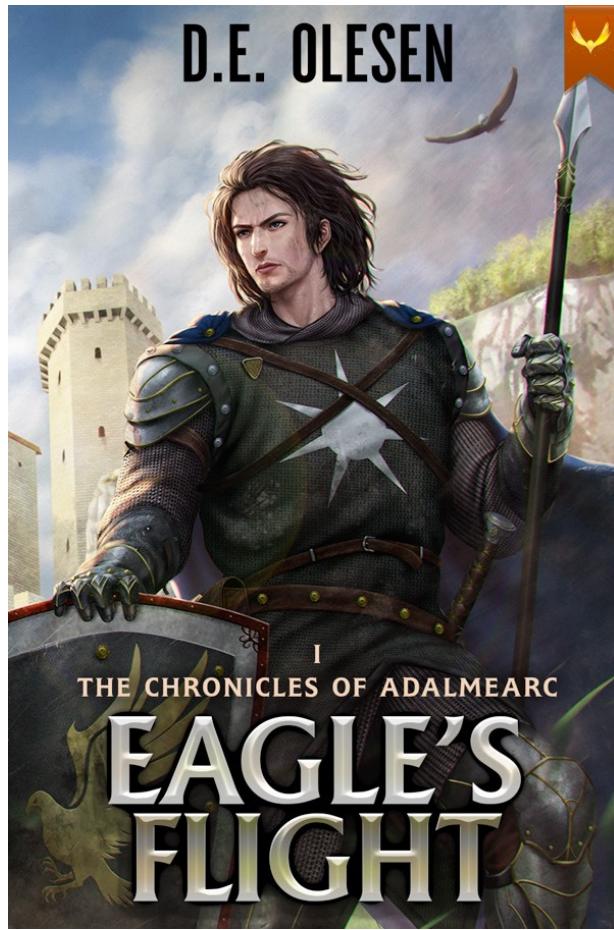
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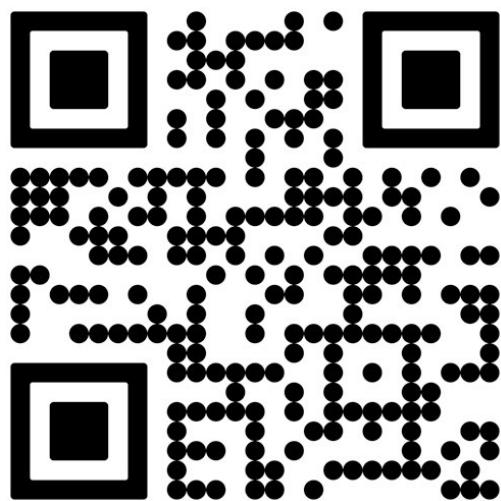
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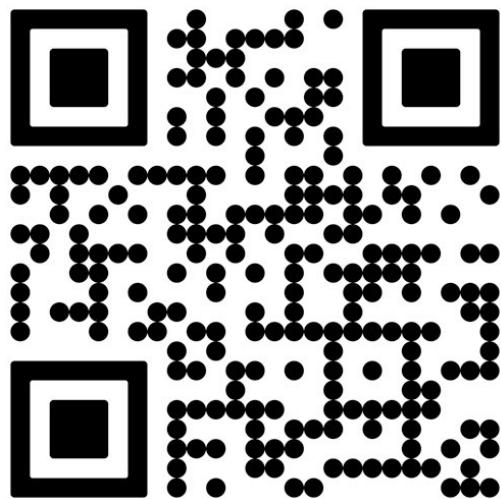


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# AFTERWORD

Wow, it's been a long time since I started writing this series. *My Best Friend is an Eldritch Horror* was my first ever attempt at writing a series more than 5 books long, and going back over it to edit the final book this year was...crazy. I believe I started writing it about 3 years ago, and 'officially' wrote the last chapter somewhere around a year ago.

When I did the edits for this novel, I added in some extra scenes toward the end to rectify a few things I felt went too quickly in the final fight. Honestly, I wanted to try a very different ending than the 'beat the life out of the enemy and claim victory' strategy. I'd been building up to it ever since it was revealed that Second may not have been completely wrong, but it was still a massive amount of fun to write—especially the epilogues. I hope you all enjoyed reading *Eldritch Bestie* as much as I enjoyed writing it!

If you like my writing, I've got a ton more work you can find on Amazon or over at my Patreon. I personally recommend my current main series, Return of the Runebound Professor. If you like Delph and wonder how he'd get on as the main character of a novel teaching a bunch of students magic, you'll love it. Check my Patreon out here!

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Until we meet again!

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