THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

PROVIDENCE

VOL. 11



TURTLEME

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1

OPPOSITION

SERIS VRITRA

It happened slowly at first. Wide, bloodshot eyes turning toward me, probing the gloom for the source of the aura they felt dulling their senses and seizing their hearts. As they saw me, their stunned gazes, one by one, were inevitably drawn downward to the gory artifact clutched in my right hand. Mouths opened in horror, but whatever words they might have said lodged in constricted throats. Tools slipped from limp fingers to clatter on the ground, forgotten, and a tremor ran through the collective consciousness of a people unequipped to understand what they were seeing.

At the eye of this storm of attention, I moved with unrushed purpose, the rough path crunching beneath my feet, my flowing white robes glowing like a beacon in the industrial gloom.

Every miner, laborer, and wogart farmer I passed froze before quickly parting before me. Those closest stepped back, instinctively putting distance between themselves and the palpable force emanating from me, while others were drawn to it like moths to flame, forgetting their mundane tasks as curiosity and awe overwhelmed their sense of self-preservation.

A heavyset woman with thin hair and gray dust dirtying her face let out a ragged cheer. When my eyes settled on her, those closest hurried to step

back. I didn’t smile but allowed a second of eye contact, assuring her that she’d been seen.

Others couldn’t keep the hostility from their faces—those who were loyal to Agrona or who believed the ill-conceived propaganda that was broadcast about me—but none of them had the courage to give voice to their feelings or impede my progress.

A few, the smartest of them, ran.

By the time I reached the portals to the second level, they were already in chaos. Guards were scrambling to find their battle groups and maintain anything resembling a formation. They were shouting at each other, no one apparently willing to accept the responsibility of command. Relictombs officials—the clerks and attendants responsible for monitoring the portals—were standing off to the side, wringing their hands and looking on nervously.

As my intent washed over them, they all slowed to a standstill. Someone uttered a prayer to the Vritra.

Wanting them to hear and understand me, I reined in my aura and stepped up to within easy speaking distance. The thing in my hand twisted slightly as I came to a stop, leering at the soldiers and guards. Half of them stared at me, their weapons held nervously before them, but half couldn’t wrench their eyes away from the artifact.

One of the attendants, an older man with a bald head and long gray mustache who wore the official robes of a Relictombs clerk, found his courage. He took a few shaking steps toward me and raised his chin, his eyes carefully avoiding my hand. “S-Scythe Seris Vritra.” He paused, swallowing heavily. “You are under a-arrest for crimes against Alacrya, by order of the High Sovereign!” He finished stronger, building confidence as he spoke.

When I smiled at him, that confidence shattered like teeth beneath a maul. He stepped back, trying to hide himself behind the other officials, but they stepped back as well, sacrificing him to the pyre of my attention.

But I wasn’t there to bully or murder lowborn mages, even those too blind to see that I was fighting for their benefit. “I have not come for bloodshed. None of you will die here—unless you insist on it. Leave. Flee the Relictombs and return home to your blood.”

Still, I couldn’t feel righteous about the choice I was giving them. I’d been a Scythe too long not to see the trap in it. Really, it was a choice in *how* to die. Either they stay and fight me in a hopelessly one-sided contest, or they flee and wait to be hunted down and executed by loyalist forces.

The non-combatants all broke and ran, scurrying away like insects suddenly and unexpectedly exposed to the light. The guards exchanged grim-faced looks, but they stayed. They understood the choice.

A tall man shouted, and the soldiers reformed into their battle groups. Shields, both magical and mundane, were raised against me. I held my position.

Another shout, and spells began to fly, lighting up the dim zone with bright blues, yellows, and reds. Bolts of fire and blades of wind impacted the barrier of mana cladding my skin and robes, deflecting harmlessly. My mana rippled with a dusky shadow, turning the outline of my body gray. The spellfire slowed, then stopped.

I let a heartbeat pass, then thrust my free hand forward. A black cloud poured from my palm, spilling over my attackers in an instant. It surged into and through them, my void magic burning away their mana.

To a man, they collapsed, the backlash of suddenly expelling all their mana knocking most of them unconscious. A few stared up at me from the ground, whimpering or choking, expecting to die.

I marched past, leaving them where they lay. Giving them a choice only in how to die felt wrong. It was how Agrona operated. They had chosen to stand their ground. Perhaps they were blindly loyal to Agrona, but maybe they were just hopelessly trapped in a system that they had been born into and had lived every second of their lives inside. Did they even know there was a world outside the too-close walls pressing in on them? It occurred to me that they likely couldn’t see it.

But I could see. And I could choose, too.

Casting a quick look back at the field of fallen mages—fallen, but alive—I activated one of the portals to the second level and stepped through.

And I found the second level to be exactly as I expected it.

The courtyard containing the ascension and descension portals, which capped the end of the long boulevard that ran through the heart of the zone, was a rush of organized activity.

A hundred mages, perhaps more, encircled the courtyard, weapons drawn and spells active, cordoning off the portals. Another twenty hurried to set up a series of devices in an arc in front of the portals. Small pockets of people lingered around the edges of the courtyard, outside of the cordon, and in the shadows of the nearest buildings.

The devices were constructed of dull, blue-tinged metal housings containing large mana crystals that had been carefully carved into concave bowls. Heavy wiring ran from one to the next, chaining them all together, and finally to a glass tank full of bubbling blue liquid.

Several of the mages jumped at my appearance, turning weapons on me.

“Scythe Seris Vritra!” a mage with black hair and a well-trimmed beard barked, giving me a stiff salute. The rest snapped to attention and followed suit.

I waved the formality away. “Sulla, things have gone to plan.”

The High Mage of the Cargidan Ascenders Hall nodded vigorously. “Yes, Scythe Seris. Resistance was limited.” He nodded to a few bodies laid out nearby. “Fighting has been worse elsewhere within the second level, but our efforts to set up your…whatever this is…have been unimpeded. It’s almost complete.”

Another man—who wore no armor or battlerobes and went bare-chested, proudly displaying his bronze skin and chiseled form—jogged up and bowed quickly. “Perfect timing, as expected,” Djimon of Named Blood Gwede, High Mage in Itri, said with his customary sharpness. “All tempus warp platforms in the city have been destroyed, as you ordered, except for

one currently being defended by Highblood Rynhorn. They are fighting fiercely to protect it, but they can't hold out against our forces. Ten more minutes and their soldiers' bodies will litter the Relictombs floor while my Casters see to the platform."

"With the receiving platforms destroyed, that will be our only way in and out," Sulla added, gesturing to the array of permanent portals that allowed transit between the first and second level. I could tell he was seeking assurance that the plan wouldn't result in us being trapped or overrun.

"Not the only way," I said, instead of attempting to placate the man. My gaze followed the line of the central boulevard to where I could see the distant glow of the primary ascension portal even from here.

The sound of approaching armored footsteps brought my head around, mostly due to the slight hitch in every other step. Cylrit bowed slightly, and the two ascenders took a step back, giving us space, their eyes on the ground. My retainer had blood spattered over his face and armor.

"Would you like me to take that, Scythe Seris?" he asked, his tone even. I was certain only I would notice the pinched stiffness in both his voice and posture.

I held out the item I'd carried through the first level of the Relictombs: a severed head, jaw frozen open by rigor mortis, tongue black and shriveled as a salted slug.

Cylrit showed no squeamishness as he accepted the proffered appendage. He lifted it up to look into the dead, staring eyes, then made his way to the mana battery that would power the artifacts I had designed.

The rest of the mages moved back, their work done. Everything was ready.

Cylrit lowered the head into the liquid, which immediately began to glow, then quickly removed himself from the array.

The carved crystals of each device began to emit a resonant hum, then to glow a matching hue to the blue liquid, and finally to project visible waves of mana through the air, bombarding the portals with raw energy.

The effect was immediate. The shimmering portals jumped and jerked, their subtly shifting surfaces suddenly alive with shockwaves and multi-colored striations. Ripples and waves rolled away from the portal frame, collided, and rebounded in every direction at once across all of the portals.

“And you’re sure that—” Djimon cut himself off mid-question.

I knew we wouldn’t have to wait long to see proof that the artifacts were working. The encircling ascenders turned their gazes inward, watching. I was joined by a few other high-ranking individuals—Anvald of Named Blood Torpor and Harlow of Highblood Edevane, who were both High Mages of their respective Ascenders Association factions in Aedelgard and Nirmala, as well as Highlord Frost and his granddaughter Enola—but they stayed silent, simply watching, waiting.

Within a few minutes, one of the portals changed. It stretched, smoothing momentarily, the ripples melting away, and a figure appeared within it.

Dragoth, his broad form filling the entire portal, glowered, his face strained, out from the bombardment of mana, but he was gone again almost as soon as he had appeared. A minute passed, and he appeared again, flickering into and out of another portal so fast that to blink would have meant missing it.

He repeated his futile attempts with each portal in turn, but the portals were destabilized by the bombardment of mana and were not maintaining a strong enough connection to complete the transition. As soon as he arrived on the second level, he was already being drawn back to the first.

There was no way through the portals as long as my artifacts remained in place, empowered by Orlaeth’s remaining mana.

Others began to appear as well, several at a time in every portal frame. After only a minute, a ripple running across the surface of one of the portals crossed over a man just as he appeared, flaying the skin from the right side of his face. He was gone again in an instant, and the attempts to breach the portals ceased abruptly.

A cheer went up, led by Enola of Highblood Frost.

I stayed by the portals for some time after, congratulating all who came to report in and giving orders where necessary. A slow procession of highlords

from my highblood allies arrived when they were certain the fighting was done and the portals were deactivated, seeking to express their gratitude with the same handful of platitudes while wheedling for assurances that I did in fact know what I was doing.

Eventually, news came that the last of the receiving platforms had been destroyed, which made it impossible for anyone to use a tempus warp or dedicated portal to reach us. My plan had been a success.

I turned my face to the sunless sky, enjoying the warmth it projected onto my skin. So much of these last months had been spent underground in laboratories or bunkers, it felt good to stand beneath open sky, even if it was a construct of magic.

A handful of Instillers remained with the equipment, as well as ten battle groups to ensure no one attempted any manner of sabotage. Eventually, it was only these guards, myself, and a patient Cylrit left in the courtyard, the ascenders and highbloods having gone about other duties or retired to their estates and inns to celebrate and rest.

Cylrit shuffled on his aching leg, clearly uncomfortable. I waited for him to break the silence between us. “Are you certain about this?” he finally asked, his voice low.

I began walking and motioned for him to follow. We moved down the wide central avenue that continued uninterrupted all the way to the primary ascension portal into the rest of the Relictombs. People watched us go by from shop windows and inn balconies, unsure what was happening.

We hadn’t been able to ensure that only my supporters were within the zone, of course. My people had done the best they could, with the Ascenders Association purposefully slowing the flow of traffic while the highbloods spread rumors encouraging those not affiliated with us to leave, even if temporarily, but many of the people who lived within the zone, those who served in the economy that had grown up around the ascents, were neutral to or even ignorant of our efforts against Agrona.

Some would eventually prove outright hostile to us, I knew.

“There is too much here outside of our control,” Cylrit continued, his attention constantly shifting as he, out of habit, watched for any potential threats. “Ways this can go wrong that we haven’t even considered yet.”

“I know,” I answered. If this argument came from anyone else, I would have assured them that every variable had been accounted for, every layer of the plan designed to be infallible, but Cylrit understood what we were facing just as well as I. “Perhaps, with ten more years to plan, we could have perfected this gambit. But this is war, Cylrit. And when you’re fighting gods, time is not on your side.”

“It all comes down to that, doesn’t it? Time…” Cylrit paused, and I stopped to look at him. “How long can we power the disruption artifact? When will Caera return with Arthur? Can we hold out longer than it will take Agrona to figure out a way in?”

I didn’t remind him of what we’d already accomplished—taken over half of Sehz-Clar, evaded Agrona’s armies, embarrassed his pet Legacy, slain one of his Vritra Clan Sovereigns, and now blocked him from the Relictombs itself—and instead let him vent his fears.

“We’ve taken many risks these past decades, Seris, but this…it feels too much like we’ve backed ourselves into a corner with no way out.” Cylrit took a deep breath, then added, “My apologies. I do not doubt you, I—”

I raised my hand and he went silent. “Remember, we’re not trying to win this war. Only to stand in opposition to a tyrant. But I don’t think this will be our last stand. Have faith.”

“In Arthur?” he asked, his brows wrinkling in the rare show of genuine frustration.

“In humanity. In fate. In me. Take your pick.” I smiled and teasingly brushed at his face as if I could wipe away his frown. “Everyone needs faith. These ‘gods,’ the asura, rely on it to maintain their control over those they call lesser. And the people need it, too. They need to *believe* in something. If we truly want to break Agrona’s hold over them, we need to give them somewhere else to put their faith, even if only for a short time. Just to transition them into the new world we’re trying to build.”

“And if we die trying?” Cylrit asked, the emotion draining out of him.

“Then we die well.”

CECILIA

Where am I? I wondered, pulling back from something moving beneath me.

A bed of entangled vines and roots was writhing across a blank stone floor, jostling me and making my stomach lurch. My eyes widened as I traced the path of the vines: They grew over the floor, walls, and ceiling with no beginning or end, completely encircling me. And as they squirmed, they constricted around me.

Only the way forward was open, but even that path was diminishing moment by moment. I began to scramble over the vines, but my hands and feet were constantly pulled into the living floor, and each time the vines would grasp at me, threatening to grab hold and not let go.

I lost all context of time as I hurried first on hands and feet, then on knees, and finally crawling forward on my belly like a worm. The vines and roots were crushing me, suffocating me. My heart battered against my chest as my lungs struggled to draw in breath, and suddenly I felt certain I was going to die there, throttled by the vines.

An emerald-green beacon shone from somewhere ahead. Desperately, I pulled myself toward it, now pressed flat by a giant green fist. Every inch forward took so much effort and energy that I was sure I wouldn’t make it. And I didn’t, not far. A vine wrapped around my ankle, another my right arm, and then a black vine covered in thorns reached for my throat.

A hand extended out from the light. Its delicate strength seemed familiar—like looking in a mirror—and I grasped it with frantic strength.

In contrast, the hand had the kind of calm, inexorable force I associated with Agrona. That pure, unwavering surety of confidence. It should have crushed my own hand, but instead I was pulled through the vines until I slithered out onto a patch of sun-warmed grass.

The hand helped me to my feet.

Slowly, for some reason afraid to look, my gaze followed the slender arm up to the graceful arch of a shoulder and smooth, unmarked skin of a neck, half hidden beneath silver-gray hair. Finally, I met the turquoise eyes.

Tessia Eralith. My vessel.

“W-what is happening?” I asked, frustrated by the weakness in my voice. I felt like a whimpering child standing before her, but the elven woman was completely at ease in this clearing at the heart of a storm of strangling vines and roots. “Where are we?”

“In your mind,” she answered simply. “You are dreaming, and your subconscious is trying to convey what is happening inside of us.”

A dark green, snakelike coil bumped against me, and I took a nervous step toward the center of the clearing, having to stand less than an arm’s length away from Tessia to keep from touching the moving walls. I brushed a lock of dusty brown hair out of my face, unsure what to say.

“It’s the elderwood guardian,” she continued, casting a thoughtful, sad sort of look around. “Our body absorbed its mana core. Integration…I never knew.” She shook her head in wonder. “When the core dissolved, the elderwood guardian’s beast will was released. As, I suppose, was I.” She shrugged, as if this second point didn’t mean very much to her. “The unconstrained will is feeding off the mana now integrated within our body. It is tearing us apart.”

“*My* body,” I ground out, the word “our” stabbing like a dagger into my mind each time she said it.

A humorless smile played at the edges of her lips, but I couldn’t read the intent behind her expression. Even as we were talking, the clearing in which we stood was shrinking. A pulse like a slow heartbeat ran through the vines every few seconds, and with each beat they grew.

I tried to close my eyes, wanting to focus, but I couldn’t. *A dream*, I remembered. “How do I stop it?”

There was cold fire in the elf’s eyes as she answered. “You control it. Only…” She paused, watching a tendril of leafy vine uncurl beside my face. “You can’t. The elderwood guardian’s beast will isn’t just mana for

you to dominate. It takes time, focus, and a little bit of luck. We don't have time. This body will be dead within the hour."

I gnashed my teeth and stepped toward her threateningly. When she looked at me with pitying amusement, I suddenly felt like a child balling my fist at an adult. And I *hated* it. "You'll die too, then," I ground out, struggling to maintain my senses and not give way to despair. "I don't think you—" The words caught in my throat as I remembered her wrestling for control of my body when Grey had attacked me at the Victoriad.

"I don't want to die," she admitted. As the vines pulsed and grew, she sank to her knees and eased back, sitting comfortably among the writhing plants. Instead of looking down on her, I found that I too was sitting, even though I hadn't made the conscious effort to do so. "But I am willing to. We are enemy combatants, Cecilia. If we met on opposite sides of the battlefield, I would be ready to lay down my life to defeat you. Here, if I could trade my life for yours, wouldn't it be worth it?"

"That's not…" I started, then stopped again, chewing my lip as I struggled for words.

Strategically, she was correct. She was no one, just the vessel for my reincarnation, whereas I was the Legacy. If she sacrificed herself here to destroy me…

"Please…" I begged in a raspy whisper, reaching for her hands. "My life was *stolen* from me, all because of an accident of my birth, something I couldn't control. I never asked for any of this. I just want my life back. You can understand that, can't you?" I caught on an idea and began speaking faster. "Eventually, Agrona will send me back to my own world—me and Nico. You…you can have this body back when I'm gone! I promise it. I'll make Agrona…"

Tessia let out a little, musical laugh, then covered her mouth and looked at me with a sickening fusion of mirth and pity. "Stars above, you don't even see the irony, do you?"

I sat up straight and glared at the elf. "You don't understand anything. You have no idea what I've been through."

Her brows crept up as the amusement in her smile bled away, leaving only sadness. “Nothing you’ve ever done—no thought you’ve ever had—is a secret from me.”

I swallowed heavily, unable to explain the sudden cold, hopeless dread that clutched at my chest.

“So much about Arthur makes sense, now, knowing…everything.” A vine as thick as my arm wrapped around Tessia’s waist like an embrace, and she plucked a golden flower from it, twirling it in her fingers as she spoke. “His maturity, his confidence, even as a child…and I thought you’d be the same, having lived two lives. But…”

She met my eyes and held them. “You’re a child. Stunted.” I started to snap a retort, but she kept talking. “You haven’t had two lives. Not even one. Which is why you can’t see what’s being done to you. You *know*, of course. But you don’t *see*.”

I reached for my mana, wanting nothing more than to burn the elf’s soul from my mind, but my magic was gone. I was defenseless, empty. It was my worst nightmare come true.

In my despair, I failed to notice the vine wrapping itself around my right arm. When I finally realized what was happening, I flinched away from it, but it held me fast. Then they were all over me, these bright green tendrils blooming with crimson flowers, pinning my arms and legs, wrapping around my throat…

And Tessia just watched with that distant sadness. I wanted to curse her, beg her, but I couldn’t do anything. I was paralyzed. The elderwood guardian was choking the life from me, both in the dream and out of it. I was dying.

I couldn’t believe it. It felt so purposeless, so empty of meaning. At least my death on Earth had been my choice. The only way I could seize control. But this, this was…

I woke up.

The room was dim, and in the gently wavering light of a burning torch the shadows looked like vines crawling up the walls. I shrank from them, and

my body *burned*. I gasped from the pain, and a marble-skinned hand stroked my hair as a face loomed over me.

There was a frightening intensity in the way Agrona was inspecting me, but I couldn't comprehend the emotion behind the look.

"What…?" I tried to ask, but my throat was dry, the muscles of my neck still sore from where the vines had strangled me…except that had been a dream. *Only a dream*.

"Hush, Cecil dear. Your body struggled to handle both the Integration and the release of the beast will, but you are through the worst of it." Agrona petted my head, speaking in a low, soothing tone while prodding me with invisible fingers of mana, massaging my mind to help calm me down. "Do not doubt yourself. You've done wonderfully."

I leaned into the mental probing of his power like a feline begging to be petted. Recognizing this fact made me ill, but I was too weak and tired to resist. Instead, my gaze drifted through the room, and I realized that we were not alone. Several other mages were standing around the table or lingering in the shadows. We were in a laboratory or Instillers' workshop of some kind, but I didn't recognize it.

"Who…where…?" Again, my thoughts and voice gave out before I could create a complete thought.

Agrona waved his hand, and the other mages quickly began filing out of the single door. "We were working to hold your body together while you fought for control of the mana inside you."

I frowned, trying to remember the dream, the feel of my body being pulled apart by the elderwood guardian's will, what Tessia had said, but it was all starting to blur together now. Still, I couldn't shake the sensation that something was wrong.

"You're not telling me something," I said, watching the last of the mages vanish like the tattered edges of my dream.

Agrona's expression softened, and he looked down on me like I thought a father was supposed to look at his daughter. "You're confused, Cecil, and no wonder. You need time to rest and recuperate."

I couldn’t argue with him—not now, not about that.

Something stirred inside of me. I felt her consciousness present just beneath the surface, watching, waiting, simultaneously curious and guarded. There was the elderwood guardian, too, now docile. Tessia’s mind pressed against mine like a building migraine; the beast will sat heavy in my stomach and made me want to vomit.

Why did you stop it from killing me? I asked, unsure if Tessia’s disembodied spirit would even be able to respond.

There was a long pause, and I thought perhaps she couldn’t, or wouldn’t, answer me. Then her voice sounded in my head, clear and bright as a silver bell: *‘I have a promise to keep.’*

I swallowed hard but couldn’t leave it at that alone. *When you struggled for control, before, you were trying to get us killed. Where was this promise then?*

She didn’t answer.

“Come now, let’s get you to your room,” Agrona said, making me flinch. I had nearly forgotten he was there. “What you’ve accomplished is incredible, a feat no other lesser has managed in a long, long time. And soon, you will be given the opportunity to test just how powerful you’ve become.”

Head aching and stomach roiling, I let myself be helped up from the table, which I only then realized was covered in indecipherable runes. I blinked several times and tried to read them again, but they were like nothing I’d ever seen before. My skin crawled to look at them. *Something is wrong*, I thought again. Agrona’s tone, the runes, the dreams…

Subtly, I drew away some of the mana lingering in the rune-etched table, charging it with holding the memory of those runes and their purpose. I had no core to channel the mana, but I didn’t seem to need one.

The mana flowed through me as effortlessly as the blood in my veins. Instinctively, it infused my muscles, offering my trembling body strength. I was aware of it in a way I never had been before, like my senses extended

directly into the atmosphere, encompassing the air, walls, floor, even the table I’d woken up atop. I felt it all as if it were a part of me.

Agrona stretched out his arm, smiling warmly.

I stepped past him, avoiding his hand as I wrapped my mind and thoughts firmly in mana.

Just like my benefactor, the undeciphered runes weighed heavily on my mind, their true intention also hidden beneath a facade.

2

TIME

SYLVIE INDRATH

“Kyu…?”

A wry, trembling smile curved one corner of Arthur’s lips. “Welcome back, Sylv.”

I blinked again, and Arthur was an old man with streaks of gray in his wheat-blond hair and deep furrows wrinkling his skin. Without meaning to, I withdrew, pressing my fingers against my lips.

This too-old image of my bond hesitated, his hand, which had been reaching out toward me, pulling back slightly, just an inch, his brows creasing into a frown. I blinked, and the vision faded. Arthur, the real Arthur, was standing—no, floating—in front of me, his liquid-gold gaze like the hot summer sun on my skin.

His hesitation abated and he leaned forward, wrapping strong arms around me and pulling me to him.

I closed my eyes and let out a shaking breath. Arthur’s relief washed over me, pure and warm and hard-won. So many moments where my return was within arm’s reach and then snatched away by circumstance, so much time and energy focused on the stone containing my essence. Beneath the relief,

there was a hint of regret—slight but bitter—that it had taken so long or been necessary at all. And the anxiety, the fear…the weight of it enough to crush anyone weaker, enough to choke the life from anyone else.

My mind was still knitting itself back together, and as we held each other, I lost track of where my bond began and where I ended. “Papa…it’s really you. I was afraid you were a dream.”

The concept of time was all but shattered. Floating in that strange aetherial place, just the two of us, our embrace might have been only the briefest contact or lasted yet another lifetime. I held desperately onto that connection, needing Arthur’s presence to anchor me into that moment in time and space.

“So…hey there,” a voice—not Arthur’s—said from the void.

My eyes snapped open, and I stared incredulously at a strange being floating next to Arthur.

He was shaped like a wolf, except his fur seemed to be grown out of purest shadow and a burning ring of aetheric flame wreathed his neck. He was considering me with bright eyes, which glowed in the gloom beneath a pair of straight onyx horns.

I reached up and brushed the horns sticking out from my own head, feeling inexplicably nervous. But no, that wasn’t quite right. I wasn’t nervous; I was confused. The *creature* was nervous, but his emotions were bleeding into me, like Arthur’s. I prodded, but there was a wall between our minds.

“Sylvie, hi—y’know, actually, I’m not quite sure what to call you. Like, are we siblings? Step-siblings? Are you my mom? My aunt? Aunt Sylvie has kind of a—”

“Hello, Regis,” I said with a growing smile, his name appearing to me from Arthur’s mind.

Suddenly, flashing memories and disjointed thoughts were jumping like electrical sparks behind my eyes. It was too much, and each flash was accompanied by a dull-needle jab of pain.

Closing my eyes, I pressed my fingers into my temples. “Arthur—your thoughts—I can’t…”

An undercurrent of alarm ran beneath all my other conflicting emotions, then the deluge ceased. I drew a steadying breath, relief washing away the lingering pain.

“Sylvie, I’m sorry. I should have realized,” Arthur said, and I felt him drifting back slightly.

I shook my head. “Not your fault…” Slowly, my eyes opened again. They met Regis’s, who appeared stricken, as if he himself had done something to harm me. “My mind is…full of a raging storm right now. My own thoughts are disparate and disjointed and…it’s a lot. But it’s a pleasure to meet you, Regis.”

The wolf bent his front legs and dipped his head in a sort of awkward, floating, lupine bow. I couldn’t help but giggle at the sight, which made Regis chuckle too.

“You look different,” Arthur said into the silence that followed.

The words made me uncomfortable, but it took me a moment to realize why. We’d been apart for such a long time, but for me, the battle against Nico and Cadell in Dicathen had been both moments and a lifetime ago, and I was unaccustomed to Arthur shrouding his thoughts and feelings so completely from me.

Closing my eyes, I reached for his mind. I felt the barrier, then a question. I nudged into it, and it gave way, molding itself around me. Not breaking completely, but making room for me. I saw myself through Arthur’s eyes.

My blond hair spilled down over my shoulders. Black horns protruded from the hair, stabbing downward and out. My eyes were bright yellow, gemlike, set in a face that had grown slightly sharper, slightly older. I wore a black dress of fine, glossy scales that caught the purple light of this realm and reflected it back, making it look like my body blurred away into the void.

“I look older,” I said, opening my eyes. “Just like you. But then, I’ve waited a lifetime to return.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur asked. The worry in his face was also mingling into my own emotions, though distantly. “Sylvie, what did you do, back then? Where have you been?”

“Time,” I said, then shook my head, uncertain how much of what I remembered was reality. “There will be time to tell you everything I know.” I looked around again, growing more curious as the haze of my return faded. “Where are we?”

“If it has a name, I don’t know it,” Arthur said seriously. “I’ve been thinking of it as the aether realm. The djinn built their Relictombs within it.”

Knowledge of what those terms meant manifested from Arthur’s thoughts as he spoke, but that only served to confuse me further.

“You have a lot to tell me too, it seems,” I said with a shake of my head. As I spoke, I became aware of a discomfort in my lungs, like I was breathing under a heavy blanket.

“Sylv?”

There is no mana here, I realized with a sort of detached curiosity. I experienced this lack of mana as a burning that was slowly growing outward from my chest. It was not dangerous—not yet—but it was uncomfortable and further disoriented me.

“We should go,” Arthur said, his worry growing sharper. “This place isn’t safe for asuras. We can catch up in—”

“No, I’m okay,” I assured him, homing in on something that had jumped across the partially shielded connection between our minds. “There is something else you want here, isn’t there?”

“I…” Arthur rubbed the back of his neck, the sight of which conjured a warm glow in my chest. “No, really, I don’t want to keep you here any longer than necessary.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his feeble attempt to lie. “Your mental barrier has grown…crass, Arthur.”

“Blame him,” he said, chagrined, gesturing to Regis.

“Whoa, hey, I’m just floating here. What’d I do?”

Reaching out, I touched the tips of my fingers to Arthur’s chest. “Your core,” I said, piecing together tendrils of half-formed thought that drifted along our mental connection. “You really have changed, haven’t you?”

Little by little, Arthur opened his thoughts to me, showing me the truth of what had happened to him. The connection didn’t overwhelm me like before since Arthur was still keeping a barrier between us, but it was enough that I could make sense of the memories that drifted through: his core, broken; rebuilding it with aether; the trap, pushing energy into him until his core cracked…

“Sylvie, I’m just glad to finally have you back. Nothing else matters. I don’t even know if I *can* form another layer around my core, but that’s a problem for another day. Right now—”

“Arthur, everything is important when you balance the weight of worlds on your shoulders.” I pushed down the ache in my chest, steeling myself to do whatever was necessary. “You’ve worked so hard to bring me back, but now I am, and I’m not going anywhere. If staying in this place just a bit longer will help you stand up against my father and grandfather, then you have to do it.”

When Arthur’s discomfort wasn’t immediately soothed, I added, “Please. It will help me understand. A lot of what you’ve shown me feels so unreal.”

“Whoa, that’s a lot of conflicting emotions from both sides,” Regis said, shaking like a wet dog. “This is going to take some getting used to.”

Arthur regarded Regis for a moment, then closed his eyes and settled his mind. “You were my priority in coming here, Sylv, but if I can take this opportunity to increase my power as well…”

No need to explain, I said mentally.

He gave me an abashed smile before pulling me into another quick hug. “Thank you, Sylv. Sorry I haven’t already said it, but I’m glad you’re back.”

“I shudder to think what you’ve been up to without me,” I teased, reinforcing my own mental barrier so my thoughts didn’t leak into Arthur’s. I needed to be strong, for him, like I always had. I was his protector. Despite what this place made me feel—like I was warm water in a leaking bath, slowly cooling and draining away—this next step for Arthur felt essential.

I had waited for him for a lifetime. I could wait a short while longer.

Arthur closed his eyes and the aether began moving. I drifted back several feet, giving him space to focus.

Regis left his side, swimming through the void until he was next to me. I could tell he was eager to say something, but he seemed to be building his courage. The shadow wolf both looked and felt unlike any creature I had ever seen, simultaneously alien and familiar, comfortable and antagonistic.

As I looked at him, I noticed something else for the first time. Far below us, something like a dungeon was floating freely in the void. Thick, semi-transparent walls of earth and stone encased it, but I could see dark hallways inside.

“The Relictombs,” Regis said, glancing downward. “Sort of like home. I guess you could say I was born there. Not *there*, in particular, just… y’know.” He was quiet for a moment, almost sheepish, then, “Hey, I just wanted to say, no hard feelings, right? Like, I’m not the ‘Sylvie replacement’ or anything like that. He didn’t, you know…”

“Fill the void I left in his life by bonding with another talking, shapeshifting, aether-wielding being?”

“Uh, exactly,” Regis answered uncertainly. “I was born from the acclorite in his hand right after you disintegrated and stuff.”

“No hard feelings,” I answered with a small smile. “I’m glad he had you. He can be…well, it’s hard to say what would have happened if he’d been alone, but it probably wouldn’t have been good.”

“I *can* hear you, you know,” Arthur said, opening one eye to peek at us. “Sorry to interrupt, but I need Regis. There is boundless aether here, but

harnessing enough of it without the djinn's artifact forcing it into me is going to be difficult."

Regis rolled his eyes at me. "Master calls…"

I snickered behind my hand as the shadow wolf dissolved into a small horned wisp of energy before plunging into Arthur's chest. Arthur gave me a tired yet gentle smile before closing his eye again.

I watched closely, trying to follow what was happening with limited success. The aether core itself was impossible not to be aware of, burning like a star beneath Arthur's sternum, but my senses weren't fully aligned yet. The strange void, the absence of mana within it, and the overwhelming presence of the aether all served to confuse sight, hearing, touch, and the finer senses of my mana core.

It would require patience, I knew. My body and mind were still regenerating.

Even in the brief glimpse of memory I'd received from Arthur, there was so much to come to terms with. Just as I had given of myself to save Arthur, he had turned around and poured himself into me to bring me back. It had been his care, protection, and love that had helped me hatch the first time, as well. But even before that, I had guided his spirit…

I winced and rubbed my temples again. It was painful to think too hard about the paradox of his reincarnation and my own return to my egg, my spirit divided and scattered through time like fall leaves that in turn shelter and fertilize the new growth beneath them…

A moan escaped me, and I had to bite my lip to keep from shouting in agony. Arthur, his eyes closed and his mind deep within his meditation, was oblivious, but his mere presence continued to be the mooring with which I tethered myself to reality. The dissonance between my soul and body was growing, and without him I worried I would dissolve back into nothing.

I squeezed my own eyes shut tight, so tight that strange colors and shapes bloomed behind my eyelids. My knees curled up into my chest and I wrapped my arms around them, contorting myself into a ball as I hoped for the pain to pass.

‘Even time bends before Fate,’ a voice like my own said in my head. *‘You’ll find that out soon enough.’*

Sucking in a rattling breath, I felt consciousness receding from me. But what if one or both of us drifted apart? Or some hidden threat sensed our weakness and attacked? I *had* to remain conscious.

Growling, I clawed my way back to wakefulness, refusing to succumb. I couldn’t, not here, with Arthur so deeply within himself that he was nearly insensate. Not now, after just returning.

I tried to calm my mind, but the storm raging inside my skull was only growing in strength, and it seemed to heighten the intensity of the pain spreading from my core. Images flashed before my eyes faster than I could comprehend, my whole life playing out in rapid succession, but the timeline was jumbled, the images being plucked from all over.

I was training with my grandfather, Kezess Indrath, in Epheotus.

I was hunting in the Beast Glades while Arthur delved into dungeons as the masked adventurer, Note.

I was losing the battle to the retainer, Uto, a dozen of his black spikes already piercing my scales.

Disembodied, I was watching Grey train to be king.

Arthur and I were flying, high, so high it was as if I could flick my tail and touch the stars, the world below us hidden by the clouds. We were both grinning, happy.

I was pitting my dragonfire against Cadell’s soulfire as my mother’s will devoured Arthur from the inside out.

I looked on, helpless, as Arthur mourned his father…

The rawness of that memory shunted me back into the present.

I was breathing heavily, but the pain in my skull was receding, and I began to uncurl, stiff and aching. The burning in my core had expanded through most of my body, like I was starving for oxygen, except it was mana that I needed.

My eyes flickered open, blurry and unfocused, revealing Arthur’s face only inches from my own. His hands were on my arms, gently trying to shake me into wakefulness. He was pale with fear.

“…vie. Sylvie!”

“Fine,” I said, my voice a barely audible croak. I cleared my throat before continuing. “I’m fine, Arthur. Your core, are you…?”

Arthur’s golden eyes searched mine. “My core has cracked. I’m still attempting to contain it in a third layer with the aether Regis and I have gathered. It was…a lot harder this time. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how long it’d been.”

I shook my head and pulled away from him, trying and failing to maintain a stoic expression. I was shivering, and fine bumps had appeared all over my exposed skin. “I’m not sure how long it's been, either. A few days, maybe.”

He grimaced, but I felt a jolt of shared realization and he gave me a reassuring smile. “Time moves faster here. Even if it's been a few days, it’ll only have been a day or so in the real world. I’m sorry though. We shouldn’t have stayed. I didn’t think it would take so long. I’m almost finished.”

I was glad his eyes closed a second later, because the shaking became more violent. I hugged my arms around myself, but it was no help. Instead, I tried to follow the final process of Arthur’s creation of this third layer around his aether core, feeling the aether move within him, hardening as he shaped it. I was disoriented, my senses dull, but at some point the barrier between my mind and Arthur’s had fallen, and I was able to trail along in the wake of his thoughts.

The process had been taxing for him. It involved drawing in incredible amounts of aether, far more than his core could handle, and incrementally overfilling the organ until it began to rupture. Then, in a rush, the collected aether was used to seal and hold the core together, forming a hardened layer around it. This new layer could only be made by sealing it into the cracks created by the fracturing process, otherwise the aether would simply dissipate.

I saw in Arthur’s mind the moment the process was complete. We both opened our eyes at the same time.

He immediately flew to me and took me by the hand. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

We rapidly descended through the void until we reached the floating dungeon, Regis trailing along behind us. From the outside, I could partially see through the rock and earth as if it were incorporeal or translucent, but when Arthur released a condensed blast of aether, it proved very real. Stone shattered, flying in every direction as Arthur ripped a hole into the outer wall, opening the way into the dungeon.

We flew into the gap against a rush of air, mana, and aether. My starving body instinctively reacted, absorbing whatever mana it could, but there wasn’t enough to sustain me.

Within the dungeon, we landed on a platform that occupied one end of a cavernous room. A single arched tunnel opened into it from the other side, across a pit at least a hundred feet wide. Something massive and squirming moved within the pit. I could feel it reaching for us.

But Arthur paid the dungeon no mind. He was facing the portal, and a metallic sphere had appeared in his hand. It came apart at a touch. *‘Hang in there, Sylv. We’ll be out of here in just a minute.’*

He used the device to change where the portal would take us.

‘It occurs to me that we’re going to have quite a bit of explaining to do when we get back to Mordain,’ Regis said, his voice strange in my thoughts. *‘Minus an Aldir but plus a Sylvie. Hopefully the phoenixes don’t start to molt at the sight of a dragon.’*

“Mordain? The Lost Prince?” I asked, confused. “I learned a little about him in Epheotus. He’s alive?”

“Well, he was when we left him,” Regis answered with a shrug before melting back into Arthur’s body. *‘Been caged up in the Beast Glades, hiding from Grandpa Kezess for who knows how long, apparently.’*

The portal shifted, showing the ghostly image of an overgrown cave on the other side. A large man occupied the room. He appeared to be going through the motions of some training form, but I saw him for only a moment before Arthur took my hand and pulled me through the portal with him.

I gasped.

My body reacted viscerally to the sudden presence of so much mana, and I instinctively began gorging on it, my core hungrily demanding it faster than my veins could even draw it in.

A booming voice let out an earsplitting “Hah!” and I struggled to look more closely at the man.

No, not a man—an asura, or at least part asura. He had a powerful frame with broad shoulders and a deep chest. Like his body, his face was broad, but there was a hint of youthful softness to it as well. His hair marked him as a phoenix, but I’d never seen a being with stranger eyes: one the orange of hot iron, the other a cool sky blue.

“I knew you’d return,” he said, his voice still far too loud. He slapped Arthur on the shoulder, and somehow my bond wasn’t sent careening into the wall. “Despite your fragile appearance and frigid demeanor, there is an inferno in your heart that burns hot as any phoenix fire, and I knew you would not turn away from the battle ahead.”

“It took longer than expected,” Arthur admitted. He was uncharacteristically uncomfortable. “And…Aldir will not be returning.”

The half-phoenix—*Chul*, I heard in Arthur’s thoughts—looked somber. “Ah. So you engaged him in glorious combat for what he did to your elven lands? It must have been quite the battle to have lasted two months.”

Arthur froze. “What do you mean, two months?”

Chul gestured to the wall, where dozens of marks had been scored into the stone. “I have trained here every day since you left, awaiting your return so that we can take the fight to Agrona. One slash for each day.” He beamed proudly at Arthur. “I’m ready to journey with you, Arthur Leywin.”

But Arthur wasn’t listening. The color had drained from his face, and his thoughts were racing faster than I could keep up with as he considered his family, Dicathen, the army of disarmed Alacryans in the Beast Glades, and the war he had left behind.

Regis congealed into being from Arthur’s shadow. His brows rose as the flames of his mane dimmed. “Well, that's a *little* longer than we expected…”

3

OVERDUE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"That's not possible."

I stared at the marks on the wall. Chul was wrong. He *had* to be. I couldn't accept that I'd been gone for so long. It felt like mere hours.

Chul shrugged nonchalantly, then lifted one muscular arm over his head to stretch. "Must be, because it has been."

"But what's happening with the war?" I demanded, getting in the half-asuran warrior's face. "Has Agrona—"

Chul grunted and turned away. "You better talk to Mordain. Come now. I'll show you."

Grinding my teeth, I followed. Sylvie and Regis fell into step behind me, each transmitting a different intensity of confusion and discomfort.

'Too soon to start trying to guess what in the abyss happened?' Regis asked in my mind.

Yes, I shot back irritably.

‘I felt the passage of time only as a growing ache in my blood and bones as my mana was exhausted,’ Sylvie thought. *‘I want to say it couldn’t have been months—I should have withered away from dehydration in a much shorter time than that—but…’*

‘You were pretty out of it when we checked on you,’ Regis answered her. *‘Is it possible you were, like, in stasis or something?’*

‘My mind was…’ Sylvie paused, struggling for the words. *‘I believe I was still regenerating from the use of the egg—stone?—thing. My flesh-and-blood brain struggled to meld with the paradoxical memories of what I experienced between my death and return. It is possible that the mana and aether infused within the egg to resurrect me might have also sustained me in that place, but really I have no idea.’*

‘Cool, cool cool,’ Regis thought. *‘Is it just me or is Chul trying, poorly, to hide something?’*

Enough, I snapped, the flow of their mental chatter threatening to unravel my last frayed nerve. *Please, just…enough.*

A hint of the sting they both felt at my reproach leaked through our mental connection, and I quickly put up my mental barrier to block them out. My own thoughts were a low, meaningless buzz of noise. I simply stared at Chul’s back and followed him through the dungeon-turned-sanctuary of the rebel asuras’ home.

“You are different,” Chul said, seemingly out of the blue. “Your energy. You seem stronger than you were. Your presence is like a forearm against my throat.”

I frowned at his back, in no mood to make small talk. In the rush to get Sylvie out of the void only to discover our long absence, I hadn’t had even an instant to turn my focus inward toward my core, yet again empowered by the formation of a third layer of aether around the remains of my original mana core.

Chul seemed to take the hint from my silence. He asked no more questions, and the Hearth passed by unnoticed until the rich smell of the alien plants made me aware of my senses once again.

A dozen or so asuras were inside the grove, milling about beneath the reaching limbs of the charwood trees. Our arrival caused a stir. From the expressions of shock, dismay, and even outrage that were directed at Sylvie, it was clear that these refugee asuras of the phoenix race didn't appreciate having a dragon in their midst.

'Called it,' Regis thought, apparently unable to help himself.

It seemed strange to me that their reaction was so strong. They'd been living in the Hearth for hundreds of years, safe from Kezess's machinations. Sylvie was no threat to them.

But I only had a few seconds to consider it, because my attention caught immediately on Mordain. The tall phoenix was pacing slowly between the trunks of two charwood trees, his hands behind his back, his golden robes just brushing the grass.

I maneuvered around Chul, quickening my pace. Some of the other phoenixes started to leave. The ones who stayed were tense and watchful. I had no doubt that if I were hostile with Mordain in any way they would leap to his defense unquestioningly.

Sensing my approach, Mordain turned, his brows knitting together, his lips pressed flat. "Arthur Leywin, you have returned to us at last—"

"I need to know what's going on out there," I said, not caring if I was being rude. "Chul says it's been two months. If that's true, is Dicathen safe? Has Agrona attacked again?"

Mordain held up his hand in a sign of peace, then gestured to a nearby bench. "There is much to tell you. Perhaps if we—"

"No!" I cut in, my sharp voice ringing uncomfortably in the quiet grove. "Just tell me."

Mordain regarded me with unaffected, almost casual, grace. Then, with a small smile, he nodded again to the bench and made his way in that direction.

'Arthur, perhaps it would be faster to stop arguing than to keep making demands?' Sylvie suggested.

I closed my eyes and forced in a deep breath, letting the air fill me. When I let the breath go, I pictured it taking some of my panicked anger with it. When that didn't help, I marched to the bench and sat down stiffly next to Mordain.

"Agrona has not attacked Dicathen again," Mordain said immediately. He crossed his legs and shifted into a more comfortable position on the bench before continuing. "In part because he is still occupied managing the affairs of Alacrya. Also, though, because of the dragons."

My entire body tensed. "What do you mean?"

Mordain's fingers drummed on the back of the bench. It was only once, then the noise and motion stopped, but it was enough to give away his agitation. "Less than a week after you and Aldir went through the portal, a rift opened in the sky above the Beast Glades. Not far from here, in fact. Dragons began pouring out."

I jumped to my feet. "Kezess—the dragons—are they—"

"They spread across the continent rapidly. Your people, it seems, have welcomed them with open arms. Dragons patrol the coastlines and sky, but also have installed themselves in your largest cities. Advisors and protectors, or so they are claiming."

The painful hammering of my heart began to ease somewhat. "They haven't attacked anyone?"

Mordain shook his head, then waved for me to be seated again. "It seems Kezess has followed through with his promise to help you safeguard your continent. Although…" He trailed off, not finishing his thought, but his blazing eyes stayed on mine.

I eased myself back down. "Dragons in every major city. You think they are as much a threat as protection."

The devious ingenuity of Kezess's ploy became clear as I considered it. The threat of direct violence never needed to be more than implied as a possibility, but this occupation also allowed him to weaponize the safety of Dicathen indirectly by threatening to remove his forces. What leader—king,

counselor, or Lance—could convince the people that they would be safer without the dragons present?

Do even I have that kind of political capital? I wondered.

Mordain's countenance had turned grim. "Kezess is ancient, and he has played this game many times before in Epheotus, with much greater stakes than now. Or at least that is the case so far as he is concerned."

I scanned the grove. Regis and Sylvie were standing nearby, watching the conversation play out. Sylvie wore a thoughtful frown, and I could tell she was thinking about her time training in Epheotus. Regis, on the other hand, was unconcerned with the appearance of the dragons.

When he felt me probe his mind, he cocked his head slightly and met my eye. *'The whole point of siding with the almighty psychopath was to buy time, right? Deal with our laundry list of deitific assholes one at a time? This lets us do that. The dragons in Dicathen aren't going to move against us or the people while your agreement with Kezess stands.'*

"Do you have any news of my family?" I asked, unable to hide the guilt I felt at having left them for months without a word.

Mordain gave me a sad smile and shook his head slightly. "While the dragons may be your allies, they are very firmly still my enemies, at least for so long as Kezess rules them. It has been difficult to learn even the little I have of what is happening outside the Hearth."

Biting back a sigh, I stood again. "I'm afraid I need to leave immediately, then. I've been away for far, far too long already."

Mordain stayed where he was, looking up at me from the bench. "Perhaps the urgency is not as great as you believe. If you'll take my council, I would suggest preparing yourself more fully before you rush into the dragon's mouth, so to speak."

'Listen, it's not like little Ellie is likely to be hanging by her toes over the caldera of an active volcano and rushing back to Vildorial right now *will be the only thing to save her, right?'* Regis asked with all of his usual charm and tact. *'We should probably, y'know, figure out what the hell is happening first.'*

‘While I don’t necessarily agree with the delivery,’ Sylvie added, shooting Regis an exasperated look, *‘Regis is right. If the dragons are in control of Dicathen, that makes it very dangerous for all of us.’*

I didn’t find their arguments convincing, but I knew there was another way to ensure that my family was safe. Returning to my seat, I withdrew the seeing artifact. “Excuse me one moment, Mordain. I want to hear you out, but I need to be sure.”

Gripping the milky white crystal, I imbued it with aether. My vision shifted, focusing on the crystal’s surface as tendrils of aether met my own. As I’d done many times before, I thought of Ellie, and my senses were drawn through the artifact and across the miles separating us. When the rush of movement stopped, I was looking down on her from above. She was lounging in a wooden chair, her leg kicked up over the arm, and she wore a look of intense boredom.

I recognized Gideon’s lab around her, and when I thought of the old inventor the perspective shifted slightly, revealing both Gideon and Emily. They were talking, asking Ellie questions. They didn’t appear to be in any danger…

I watched for another minute but nothing changed. Emily or Gideon would say something I couldn’t hear, then Ellie would offer a mute response. With some effort, I could have read their lips, but it was enough just to know that Ellie was safe. Seeing her so relaxed—bored, even—made me confident that my mother had to be fine as well.

Mentally withdrawing from the artifact, I returned it to my dimension rune.

“Thank you for your patience,” I told Mordain, who had let his gaze wander while I’d focused on the distant vision offered by the artifact.

“Where's Aldir?”

I looked up to realize that Wren Kain had appeared while I was focused on the crystal.

“He…” I paused, my gaze sweeping over all the asuras listening in.

Aldir had been right. His death was capital I could spend both with the people of Dicathen and with Kezess. Now, with the dragons present in Dicathen, I needed every advantage I could get.

From my dimension rune, I withdrew the silver rapier Aldir had called Silverlight, regarding Wren firmly but solemnly. “His crimes against Dicathen couldn't go unpunished.”

Both Mordain and Wren stared at the blade, momentarily frozen.

“You ignorant lesser,” the titan spat, throwing his arms up and glaring at me. “Aldir wasn’t your enemy. You have no *idea* what he gave up to leave Epheotus. If you think Kezess will reward you for doing his dirty work, you’re a bigger fool than I ever realized. Had I known that training you would lead us to this, I’d have let you twiddle your damned thumbs on that crater.”

More than anything else Wren said, this last part stung. Silverlight vanished again, and I straightened to my full height. “Millions of elven voices will never ring through the forests of their forefathers again, because Aldir destroyed both the voices and the forests. If you think Aldir died simply so I can get a pat on the back from Kezess, then you asuras are even more ignorant than us so-called lessers.”

Wren’s glare could have shattered granite. “So you can forgive the tyrant who ordered such an atrocity but not the soldier forced to carry it out? You truly were once a king, weren’t you?”

“Don’t mistake necessity for forgiveness,” I answered, the words as hard and cold as a knife’s edge.

Wren let out a derisive snort, but if he had anything else to say, he kept it to himself.

Mordain cleared his throat. “It isn’t my place to pass judgment on what has been done. Epheotus will mourn the passing of a great warrior, but it may also be that your people will celebrate his death as justice. What’s done is done.” His gaze shifted to Sylvie. “It seems that you were successful in your purpose.”

Thanks to Aldir, I thought, quietly acknowledging his sacrifice even if I could not voice it aloud.

Sylvie took a step forward and bobbed her head in a shallow bow. “Lord Mordain of the Asclepius clan. Thank you for assisting my bond.”

Mordain’s brows inched up, his expression difficult to parse. “Lady Sylvie of Clan Indrath. Your heritage is known to me. Half dragon, half basilisk, raised by a human. An alchemy of contradictions. Where, I wonder, does your loyalty lie?”

Sylvie raised her chin, and I felt the inner fire of her resolve swell. “With Arthur, as it always has. Dicathen is my home, its people my people. Its enemies”—she held the ancient phoenix’s eye, every syllable honed to a fine point—“my enemies.”

Mordain hummed thoughtfully. “And yet you’ll always be pulled in not two but three different directions. Both factions of asuras will attempt to use and manipulate you for their own gain. Arthur already walks along danger’s edge in his dealings with your grandfather. Your return will complicate that further.”

I moved to stand beside my bond, resting a hand on her shoulder. Regis stalked forward, standing on my other side. “Your words of caution are beginning to sound more like threats.”

“I would not dream of it. You do not seem like a man who would be easily ensnared, but against such a force as Agrona, no one is immune to temptation,” Mordain said.

Mordain’s gaze seemed to pierce my mind and conjure up a single bitter memory. In it, I begged Agrona to promise my family’s safety in exchange for my own agreement to stop fighting in the war, a deal he himself had offered.

My demeanor grew frigid as I stared back. “I’ve experienced failure and I’ve grown because of it. But, unlike those who would instead choose to keep their heads buried in the ground, I continue to fight.”

Mordain waved a hand, dismissing our argument with a sagely chuckle. “I won’t presume to tell you all what to do. The fate of this world lies in your

hands, not mine. But I know Lord Indrath well—and Agrona, too—and each will see Lady Sylvie's return as an opportunity to hurt the other, whether they use her as a weapon or a shield. You mustn't let them do either."

"We won't," I said, squeezing Sylvie's shoulder before letting my hand drop.

"Good!" Chul's voice boomed like a cannon, making several nearby phoenixes flinch. "Time to go then?"

Facing the half-asura, I gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid the presence of the dragons makes it dangerous for you to accompany us. I—"

"Already thought of that, didn't we?" Wren said, his words barbed. "I developed an artifact that will hide Chul's unique mana signature so that he presents as just another dimwitted human."

"So quickly?" I asked.

Wren Kain snorted. "Quickly? It's been two months, boy."

Chul puffed out his chest and held up a nondescript bracer forged of dull metal. "While I strive to be the spear that drives into our foes, I will don the mask of obscurity for now."

Activating Realmheart, I examined him more closely. His mana signature was powerful but did not stand out as being inhuman. "You couldn't have fixed his eyes, too?"

Chul crossed his arms and glared at everyone and everything. "My eyes are not broken."

"It'll have to be enough then." I held out a hand to Mordain.

He stood and took it, shaking it firmly. "You won't make it far without drawing the attention of Dicathen's new guardians. There is a secondary exit that will take you quite a distance from the Hearth before going above ground. I will show you the way. As we walk, I can tell you what little I know about the dragon presence on your continent."

“Farewell then,” I told Wren, offering him my hand as well. “I understand your feelings and won’t hold your anger against you. But I’d prefer to part on good terms.”

“Part?” he asked, looking at me incredulously. “I’m coming with you. I didn’t tag along with Aldir just to hide.” His gaze jumped to Mordain. “No offense.”

Mordain gave him a soft smile. “Come, this way. It is a couple hours’ walk through rarely used tunnels.”

As we approached the end of the long, roughly dug tunnel, thick tree roots began overtaking the ceiling and walls. A sort of den had been carved out of the roots, with many other tunnels converging into it. Where the tree should have been above us, instead only a hollowed-out stump remained. The rock and remaining wood had been scorched black.

“A phoenix wyrm used to nest here, but it disappeared several years ago,” Mordain commented, standing beneath the opening. “I can sense dragons even from here. You could attempt to hide your mana signatures, but I doubt you can sneak all the way from here to Darv.”

“Sneaking is for weaklings and those who have things to hide,” Chul said, his voice so deep it shook dust loose from between the roots spreading out above us.

“You're what we need to hide, smart one,” Regis said with a snort.

Wren rolled his eyes, and Chul scratched the back of his head with an embarrassed frown.

“These are Kezess’s soldiers. Supposedly, they are my allies,” I said. “Trying to hide from them could generate even more suspicion than my sudden reappearance after two months is already going to.”

“How you proceed is up to you, of course,” Mordain acknowledged, nodding. He took Chul’s hand in his own fist and held it against his heart. “Do not let your passions fly away with you. If you truly wish to find

justice for your mother, it will take time and patience. Let your new companions guide you in this."

"Let them protect me from my own worst impulses, you mean?" Chul said seriously. "I understand."

"Farewell then. It is my hope that you'll return to us when all this is over." To me, he added, "I'm trusting you to watch over one of my own, Arthur Leywin. It is not a duty—or trust—that I place on you lightly."

"Goodbye, Mordain," I said, then leapt through the burned-out stump to land on the forest floor above. The others flew out behind me.

"Suppress your mana signatures," I said, then began marching away through the thick underbrush.

We were surrounded by huge, leafy trees like guard towers that blotted out the midmorning sky. I kept Realmheart active, sensing for the mana signatures of the dangerous mana beasts that inhabited the deepest parts of the Beast Glades. There was no mana beast on either continent that would pose a threat to this group, but I didn't want the delay or distraction of having to dispatch the kinds of mana beasts we were likely to encounter.

"At this rate the war will be over before we get anywhere," Chul grumbled after twenty minutes or so. "Are you going to walk the whole way?"

"No," I answered quietly. "This should be far enough."

Like the others, I had been holding back the aetheric aura that always emanated from me, effectively masking myself from the aether-sensing dragons. I unclenched, like a fist releasing, and my aether signature radiated outward like a beacon. I actively pushed, wanting to make sure it was sensed.

Wren and Chul couldn't sense aether, but they could feel the pressure. "What are you up to?" Wren asked, eyeing me uncertainly.

A roar rent the air like a thunderclap. Tree limbs snapped and heavy clawed feet crushed and scraped at the forest floor. The ground shook with each footfall.

Chul grinned and stepped confidently out in front of the others. A colossal weapon appeared in his fist, little more than a roughly shaped iron sphere at the end of a long haft. Cracks in the sphere let out orange light as if the core was molten. The head itself was as wide as my shoulders. It must have weighed a ton, but he held it effortlessly.

A towering, bipedal horror barreled into sight, its massive, elongated jaws wide, three beady eyes on each side of its flat skull dilated with the thrill of the hunt. It reminded me of an Earth alligator standing on its back legs, except its arms were thick with corded muscle and ended in razor sharp claws, and it stood over twenty feet tall.

With a gleeful battle cry, Chul launched himself at it, bringing the weapon down on its head.

The S-class beast's natural protective mana barrier shattered beneath the force of the blow, and bright orange flames sputtered out from the cracks in the weapon's head as it crushed the thick, leathery hide, rock-hard bone, and meaty flesh to pulp.

Chul landed with surprising grace for one so large. The mana beast's corpse struck the ground much more forcefully, sending a shockwave through the forest. A handful of similarly powerful mana signatures that had been converging on our position halted, then slowly dispersed.

"Ah, to feel the blistering heat of battle flowing like honey-wine in my veins," Chul said, drawing in a deep breath. "Too bad this venator was so young. Had it been fully mature, our battle might have been one worth recounting!"

"They're coming," Sylvie said, her eyes on the single patch of bare sky we could see through the dense tree limbs and foliage.

"Let's meet them on more even ground," Wren said, combing dirt-smudged fingers through his tangled mass of hair.

With a wave of his hand, earth-attribute mana began to coalesce, drawn up from the ground to harden into solid stone. Within seconds, a ship molded to look like a sailing vessel hovered between the boughs of the huge trees. It

was conjured out of stone, but the textures were so finely manifested that it was almost indistinguishable from wood and cloth.

Sylvie slipped her arm around me and floated up over the ship's railing, setting us down on the deck. The others followed, and the ship began to rise through the branches.

Regis took a deep breath and let it out happily. "This is great. I've always wanted to be a pirate. An eye patch would really enhance my general roguish aesthetic, don't you think?"

"What is a 'pirate'?" Chul asked, his blunt features pinched in confusion.

Resting my hands on the railing, I looked west toward the distant Grand Mountains. The vast desert of Darv lay on the other side, and hidden beneath it was my family and all those who were relying on me. Already, though, I could feel the distant but oppressive waves of the King's Force radiating from multiple dragons.

"Get the ship moving, but slowly, like we're searching for something," I told Wren. The ship began to drift over the tops of the trees, moving generally westward.

"We should have some kind of signal if you wish us to attack," Chul said seriously, staring in the direction of the closest mana signature. "Perhaps if you shout, 'Attack.'"

"Noted," I said, my focus on the distant dragons.

Sylvie stepped up beside me. There was a rigidity to her posture I wasn't accustomed to. *You okay?* I asked in her mind.

'Just thinking about what Mordain said. These dragons will know what I am by sight, even if they don't know who I am. I can't even begin to foresee all the—the…' Sylvie winced, her eyes clenching shut. She turned her face away and the mental connection between us cut off as she shielded herself.

"Sylv, what's—"

She shook her head, and her eyes fluttered back open. "Nothing. Just some kind of aftershock from the resurrection." She stared straight ahead in the

direction that two of the mana signatures were emanating from.

Uncertain how to comfort her, I kept my own gaze straight ahead as well. One signature, coming from the north, became a tiny dot on the horizon. The second was slightly farther, flying from the mountains to the northwest. The third approached from the coast to the southwest.

The first to arrive was a large, emerald-scaled dragon, half the size of our ship. When he was a hundred feet away, he turned so he was flying alongside us, his bright yellow eyes scanning the deck. They stopped on Sylvie, first squinting as if unsure he could trust his own eyes, then going wide.

The second, slightly larger than the first, with pearlescent white scales that glinted in the sunlight, circled around to fly above and behind us, her huge bulk eclipsing the sun and plunging the deck into shadow.

The third was a lithe creature with dark crimson scales that seemed to drink the sunlight, not gleaming or shining even as his wings beat. His face, with jaws large enough to swallow even Chul whole, was covered in battle scars, and there was a tattered rip in the edge of his right wing. He banked sharply along our port side so that the dragons had us flanked.

The green dragon spoke, mana buttressing the words to carry them easily over the noise and distance. “Arthur Leywin. We have not met, but I recognize you by description. Lord Indrath will be pleased to know you are alive. There has been…concern at your long absence.”

“Where have you been?” the red dragon growled, tipping his wings to drift closer to the ship, his large ochre eyes probing each of us in turn, ending with Sylvie. “What are a dragon, a titan, and a couple of humans doing this deep in the Beast Glades?”

“This is hardly the reception I think my grandfather would have expected for me upon my return.” Sylvie tilted her head, managing to look both irritated and apathetic at the same time as she looked down her nose at the red dragon. In contrast to her outward poise, I felt a squirming discomfort bleed through our connection as she invoked Kezess in our defense. “You should be careful whom you mark with that malevolent gaze.”

The red's eyes widened and he pulled back. "Lady Sylvie Indrath?"

The three dragons exchanged disbelieving looks. It was the white who spoke, her voice tight with emotion. "Lady, you must come with me immediately. I will lead you to the rift connecting this world with Epheotus. Lord Indrath—"

"Stop," Sylvie said, her voice ringing with command. "My duties lie here in Dicathen for the moment. If you wish to inform Lord Indrath, feel free, but I will not be accompanying you."

The dragon winced at her words, wounded and fearful. "Lady, Lord Indrath would wish—"

Sylvie released a tangible wave of mana to project her displeasure, cutting the white dragon's words short once more.

"Neriah of Clan Mayasthal will obey," the dragon uttered quickly before turning to the other two. "Escort Lady Sylvie to her destination."

Wheeling away, the white dragon flew at speed to the east, deeper into the Beast Glades.

Only then did I sense the subtle movement of mana from that direction, like a light breeze was blowing it westward over the Beast Glades. "What is that?" I asked Wren, who had so far looked on in silence and not addressed the dragons directly.

"Lord Indrath has opened the way between the worlds," he said softly. "Epheotus lies bare to the wider universe."

"You two, give us some space," Sylvie ordered the green and red dragons. "You are not escorting prisoners."

The green nodded respectfully before banking away, flying a few hundred feet to our starboard. The red hesitated, inspecting her closely, then his gaze went to me and his face hardened. Much more slowly than his counterpart, he drifted away.

Our ship picked up speed and corrected course so we were flying straight toward the Grand Mountains.

In the distance, more dragons became obvious, flying over the mountains and the border between the Beast Glades and the Elenoir Wastes.

A shield of wings, fire, and claws.

'A shield…or a prison,' Regis sent back with a smirk. "Let's see which it is."

4

RESPECT AND REGARDS

THE DRONING of the mana-powered skyship shooting through the air provided a calming ambient static as I sat down at the foot of the ship cabin's bed where Sylvie was lying down. Outside, the pressure emanating from the two remaining dragons was a constant reminder of their presence. The third had left after a brief conversation with the others, and I could only assume she was reporting either to Windsom or directly to Kezess himself.

"You don't need to worry about me," Sylvie said, shifting as she tried and failed to get comfortable on the stone bed. "I just need more time to recover from being brought back. These waves of fatigue and discomfort…I'm sure they'll pass. My body and mind need to heal and process, that's all."

"Sylvie…" I started, then trailed off, not sure how to ask what I needed to. "I keep seeing things, flashes of memory from our linked minds, of my life—Grey's life. But what I see doesn't make sense, because they're not my memories, even though they're things that happened to me. How…"

I thought I'd come to terms with the whole reincarnation thing years ago. But every time I learned some new piece of information about how I came to this world, it further complicated my understanding.

"I don't think I can explain with words," Sylvie said, propping herself up on her elbows. "But I can let you in. I'm already struggling to hold onto those

memories. Only a part of me was there, pulled through time and space by the collapsing portal you'd ripped in our universe, while the rest of me followed you to the Relictombs and became that…stone egg."

I didn't want to cause her unnecessary strain, but the desire to understand what was happening overpowered both fear and empathy. "If you think you're strong enough."

My bond smiled, closed her eyes, and laid back. *'Open your mind to me fully.'*

I did as she requested.

I was reliving those last moments all over again, watching as she sacrificed herself for me through her own eyes, and then the diffused energy of her being was pulled apart. The memories were cloudy and distorted, but I recognized my own previous life playing out in front of me, seeing it from Sylvie's perspective as she stayed by my side through it all, right up until…

It was difficult to understand.

"Nico believed that the spell went wrong. That Agrona had miscalculated, bringing me to the wrong place at the wrong time, but…it was you. You interrupted his spell…*you* made me a Leywin."

I stood, rubbing my hands over my face as I struggled to make sense of what I'd seen. But of the dozens of questions I had, one in particular thrust itself forward, and I asked it almost without intending to. "The infant…did I kill him when I took the body? Alice's…son?"

Sylvie's arms were wrapped around her torso, and she was shivering slightly. The mental link between us closed off and she curled in on herself, wrapping her arms around her knees. "No, Arthur. There was no other soul there. The body…I think you were fated to have it."

I moved to sit next to her and rubbed her arm to warm her. From the memory, it hadn't been clear, and I wasn't sure if Sylvie could really know that, but I didn't press her further. "Thank you for showing me the memories."

She nodded, her thin frame trembling even harder.

Withdrawing a blanket from the gear stashed in my dimension rune, I laid it over her, and she was asleep in moments. Uncertain what else to do, I returned to the foot of the bed.

‘That’s a whole lot to process,’ Regis sent from the deck of the ship, where he was keeping an eye on our dragon escorts with Chul.

My mother had once, not so long ago, struggled with the question of whether or not I was truly her son. It had never been a question to me before, but now, knowing that it had been Sylvie who had placed me inside that particular baby, I couldn’t help but wonder what it meant for my relationship with my family.

The question I had asked Sylvie was only one of many stuck in my brain like a pebble lodged in a horseshoe. More answers seemed necessary to understand why my life had become what it was. *How could Sylvie have known what baby to bring my soul to?*

Knowing that no amount of self-reflection would bring answers to the questions I had, I did my best not to think about them. Instead, I withdrew the keystone I’d received from the last ruin. So much had happened in such a short amount of time—discounting the fact that nearly two months had passed in the blink of an eye, of course—that I hadn’t been able to give the keystone more than a passing thought since returning from the Relictombs with it.

Sitting with my legs crossed, I rested the small cube in my lap, considering its dark, matte surface. Both the previous keystones, which had helped me gain insight into Aroa’s Requiem and Realmheart respectively, had provided difficult, prolonged puzzles for me to solve. Although my mind was unsettled, I felt a thrill as I prepared to imbue the cuboid relic with aether.

My excitement soured only moments later as I mentally withdrew from the keystone. I stared down at it, stricken, then attempted to imbue it with aether a second time. My consciousness was pulled into it, the same as the other keystones, then…nothing. I simply came back to myself. I couldn’t reach the keystone’s inner realm at all.

Activating Realmheart, I stared at the stone cube. Both mana and aether clung to it, but that fact alone didn't reveal anything about the keystone's inner workings or suggest what I needed to do to operate it.

Not willing to give up immediately, but incredibly frustrated that I'd met with failure so quickly, I continued attempting to interact with the keystone, pushing more—and then less—aether into it, shaping the aether in specific ways, and using aether to manipulate the mana as well, but nothing I tried allowed me to progress into the inner realm where I would hopefully gain insight into a new godrune.

Feeling defeated, I finally put the relic away when Regis informed me that we'd crossed the mountains and were now flying over the desert. Joining the others on the deck, I watched the sand dunes and rocky crags speed by below.

Chul had his weapon out and was slowly moving through a series of choreographed combat techniques. His eyes were closed, but he must have felt me watching him because he said, "I would have preferred to spar with you, but Wren rightly worried that the force of our clash might shatter his conjured construct."

"There will be real enemies to fight soon enough," I said absently.

Chul guffawed. "I do not plan to fight Agrona's forces, my brother in vengeance. I will *break* them."

I shook my head, a tentative smile creeping across my face. Some of my tension eased, and I fell into idle conversation with Regis and Chul. All too soon, though, our destination approached, and what waited for us clawed its way back into my thoughts.

I pointed out a crack in the ground to Wren—one of the many surface entrances to the dwarven tunnels surrounding Vildorial—and we began descending toward the sand. Sylvie was already up when I went to retrieve her, and within a couple of minutes we were standing on the baking stone at the edge of the small ravine.

Both dragons landed as well, transforming into their humanoid forms. The green dragon became a tall, blond man in dark armor that shimmered

emerald when the light caught it at a certain angle. The red's humanoid form was shorter and more wiry. His jet-black hair and robes contrasted sharply against his pale skin, but his ochre eyes and scowl were the same.

"Come. Guardian Vajrakor will be waiting for you," the blond asura said stiffly. He took the lead down into the ravine while his counterpart moved to the rear of our group.

Wren Kain dismissed the ship, allowing it to dissolve and flow as sand, then followed close on the first dragon's heels.

"Ah, if only we could stand beneath the sun's warming gaze for a while longer before delving back under the ground," Chul said, his eyes closed and face turned to the sun. He was smiling broadly.

I said nothing, too tense to make conversation.

Inside the tunnel entrance, which was hidden within the shadows of the ravine, we were greeted by a cadre of guards. The dwarves bowed to the dragons, hardly even taking stock of who accompanied them, and let us through without issue.

We passed through several more barricades on the route to Vildorial. After the third such obstruction, where the dragon offered a quick call and response to the guards before they allowed us through, I brought it up to our guide.

"The guardian has done much to increase the security of this city," he explained as we continued to march quickly. "Several of the old tunnels were collapsed and many additional guard posts erected, along with a password system to ensure Alacryan sympathizers and spies aren't able to move freely within Darv."

I didn't miss the tone of accusation, as if the fact that these things hadn't been done before explained why the dragons were needed so badly.

The final gate into Vildorial was already open when we arrived, and a small crowd was waiting for us on the other side.

I saw Ellie and Mom before anyone else.

Rushing past the troop of soldiers, counselors, and lords, I let my mother pull me into a tender hug. “I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I’ll explain everything, but I didn’t intend to be gone so long and without sending a message. For me it’s only been a few days.”

My mother gave me a smile that I thought was somewhat stiff. “It’s okay, Arthur, you don’t have to—”

“Jerk!” Ellie snapped, punching me hard in the arm. “I can’t believe you—Sylvie!”

Ellie’s anger melted away as she made the realization. She slipped around me and jumped on my bond, wrapping her arms around Sylvie and squeezing fiercely, tears already spilling down her cheeks. “You—you’re *alive*!”

Sylvie patted Ellie’s back. “I am, though perhaps not for long if you continue to crush the breath from my body.” Sylvie beamed at me over Ellie’s shoulder, leaning her head against my sister’s.

A strong sensation of being home washed over me, doubled in potency as I experienced my own emotions and Sylvie’s simultaneously. The moment was then immediately interrupted when Daglun Silvershale, the lord of one of the most powerful dwarven clans, interposed himself between me and my family.

“Ahem. Excuse me, General Arthur, but I, along with these other fine lords, have been sent to greet you on behalf of Guardian Vajrakor.” Somewhat belatedly, he bowed to the two dragons escorting us, looking nervous, then continued. “He awaits you in—”

I missed whatever else Daglun was saying as my attention settled on Varay, who had also been waiting with the group of dwarves and my family. It had been a while since I’d seen the other human Lance, who’d spent time helping to clear the cities of Sapin of several Alacryan holdouts. Although her white hair was now short, she hardly seemed to have changed at all since I’d first met her at Xyrus Academy years ago.

She was watching me intently, her gaze an icy ray that conjured goosebumps on my arms.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, stepping around the still-speaking Daglun, who sputtered with indignation.

Varay gave me a shallow nod of greeting. “Welcome back. It was an… unfortunate time for you to disappear.” There was a note of reproach in her voice, but it was shrouded beneath the frost of her icy stoicism.

“Tell me about it.” I glanced meaningfully back at the dwarven lords, all of whom were giving me disapproving glares. I noticed that Carnelian Earthborn, Mica’s father, wasn’t among them.

“There is a situation I thought you would want to be apprised of immediately,” she continued.

Daglun cleared his throat. “Perhaps we should allow Guardian Vajr—”

“Lord Silvershale,” Varay cut in, “neither the dragons nor your Council of Lords have the authority to command the Lances.”

Daglun’s fists clenched and his face flushed. He turned his back on us and began an urgently whispered conversation with the other dwarven lords.

The dark-haired asura stepped forward, giving Varay a withering glare. “Arthur Leywin is being escorted directly to Vajrakor. You have no business interrupting us, Lance.” He grabbed me by the upper arm and attempted to drag me along after him.

I planted my feet, causing the dragon to be pulled back mid-step. He tugged once more, but I stood unmoving, aether and anger simmering under my skin, controlled but ever present.

My head slowly rotated in his direction, and I regarded the dragon with a gaze that made him freeze. “Did we not make it clear earlier?”

The dark-haired asura’s eyes narrowed. “What do you—”

“We are not escorting prisoners,” the blond asura interjected, prying his comrade’s hand from my shoulder. “But it is important that you—”

“It appears that there are more pressing issues that require my attention,” I said formally, giving them a cold, courtly smile. “Inform him of my arrival if you wish.”

The two dragons exchanged an uncertain look, then Wren stepped in. “I’ll accompany you in Arthur’s stead.” Out of the side of his mouth, he added, “And try to keep this all from blowing up in our faces.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the blond asura turned and began to march quickly away. His dark-haired companion lingered a moment longer, his suspicious gaze shifting between Wren and me, then spun and marched away. Wren let out a deep sigh and trailed behind them.

Varay’s dark brown eyes lingered on the asuras before returning to me. “Before you left, an Alacryan woman arrived in the city via some kind of teleportation artifact. She claimed to know you. I’m told that you—”

“Teleportation artifact?”

The memory of my rushed departure from Vildorial crashed into me like a thunderbolt. Daglun had said something about “the Alacryan,” and I had assumed he was talking about Lyra Dreide.

“This Alacryan, what color is her hair?”

Brows rising ever so slightly, Varay answered, “Blue.”

I bit back a curse. “Take me to her.”

Daglun, having watched this exchange from the side, looked stricken. “But Generals Arthur, Varay, you really must—”

“Feel free to return to the palace, Lord Silvershale. Your job here is complete,” Varay said frigidly.

The dwarves responded with a collective “harrumph” before marching away, allowing me to finally turn my attention back to my family.

Ellie was standing at Sylvie’s side, both arms around her waist and head on her shoulder. “So we’re all going to rescue Caera? Awesome! Let’s go.” She started to pull away from Sylvie.

Confusion at how Ellie knew who Caera was quickly turned to worry at the thought of my family present if there was a confrontation with an irritated dragon.

My mouth opened to hurriedly form an excuse, but my bond cut in.

“Eleanor, it sounds like things might get busy. I’d like to spend some time with you and Alice before we have to rush off again. Can you show me where you live?”

Ellie glanced between Sylvie and the upper levels of the city, looking torn.

“I’ve no interest in helping you serve Alacryans, only in facing them in combat.” Chul glared at me as if I’d offended him simply by knowing an Alacryan. “I will explore this dwarven city for a time.”

“No, you need to stay with—”

“And he’s gone,” Regis said, watching Chul stride quickly away, heading down toward the lower levels and drawing stares from everyone he passed.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine?” Sylvie said, unable to keep her voice from rising into a question at the end of her statement.

Careless as always, Regis immediately forgot about Chul as he nudged my mom. “So, I just spent two months floating in empty nothing-space, and I’m famished. Would you be so kind as to fix me a home-cooked meal, Mama Leywin?”

Mom scratched Regis’s head. “I guess. Do you even need to eat, though?”

Regis bent low to scoop my mom onto his back. She squealed in surprise and struggled for a place to hold on, not trusting to plunge her hands into his fiery mane.

“There aren’t many things I need, but there are a whole lot that I want!” Regis trotted down the curved highway, taking my mother with him.

“At least if I have your bond, I know you can’t vanish again,” Ellie said with a hint of a pout, letting Sylvie lead her away.

‘Do not lose sight of why the dragons are in Dicathen in the first place,’ Sylvie reminded me as she descended along the highway. *‘This Vajrakor will test you. It is our way, apparently. But he won’t go outside of whatever orders my grandfather has given him.’*

I'll mind my manners, I thought back, turning to Varay, who had looked on with her customary lack of outward emotion throughout this exchange. "Now, perhaps, you can take me to her."

We did not go to the prison but continued directly to the dwarves' royal palace, Lodenhold Hall, a huge fortress carved into the walls at the highest level of the cavern.

We were nearly to the palace before Varay spoke. "The Alacryan woman was treated well on Lance Mica's order, though she was kept imprisoned for the sake of security. The other one, Lyra, was able to confirm the prisoner's identity but had no knowledge of your relationship. Things changed when the dragons arrived, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?" I asked, heat rising to my face.

"When Vajrakor discovered her presence in the prisons, he had her transferred to a holding cell in the palace. He thought to extract information from her on Agrona's plans. Mica, Bairon, and I attempted to dissuade him, encouraging him to wait until you returned to verify her identity, but…"

"Obstinate fool," I sighed. "She's an *ally*."

"Of yours, perhaps, but not the dragons'." Varay stopped before leading us into Lodenhold. "You should know, Arthur…the dragons seem to be working to undermine you. Your sudden return may not be well received."

"The only dragon I need to worry about is Kezess Indrath," I assured her. "He'll keep the rest of his soldiers on a leash as long as our deal stands. For now, if the dragons' presence keeps Agrona from attacking again, let them drag me through the mud."

Varay regarded me intently for a second, then nodded and continued on.

We moved quickly once inside the palace grounds. I could feel the burdensome aura of Vajrakor's mana signature, which made the air inside the fortress heavy. Unlike my many previous visits to Lodenhold, the entrance hall was empty. Those who had previously been given shelter within its carved walls likely relocated when it was taken over by the dragons.

Varay led me through several tunnels, each one narrower, shorter, and dimmer than the last, until we reached a heavy iron door blocking the way. Varay knocked. A plate slid to the side at the eye level of a dwarf, which was somewhere around Varay's sternum.

"Ah, General Varay, we weren't expecting anyone to—oh! And General Arthur, returned from the dead yet again, I see. Does the, uh, guardian know you're here?"

"Open the door, Torviir," Varay commanded.

The dwarf's eyes, previously squinted in suspicion, now went wide. The window slid closed with a rasping clank. A murmured exchange between the guards was muffled by the thick door. After several frustrating seconds, I heard a heavy bar drawn aside, and then another, and finally the clatter of a chain, and the door swung inward.

Torviir stood in the open door. He was stocky, even for a dwarf, and his weathered skin bore the scars of many battles. His bright red hair had faded to an ashen red-gray with age, but his eyes were still sharp as flint, though the corners were creased with obvious discomfort. "General, as you well know we have strict orders to—General!"

I moved around the guard, knowing full well he wasn't about to try and stop me. The second dwarf took a step back, looking increasingly nervous.

The chamber was no more than eight by ten feet, barren except for a small table and two chairs. Two more heavy iron doors were set in the wall opposite the room's entrance. Both the doors and the walls around them were rune-etched to prevent them from being assaulted with magic.

"General, I must insist…" Torviir said halfheartedly.

Ignoring him, I approached the right-hand door and slid the viewing window aside, peering into the gloom beyond. The narrow, dark cell was empty. As I moved to the left, I prepared myself for the worst. When the window slid aside, a beam of dim light landed on the prone form of a woman in rags. Her eyes opened and turned toward the light, gleaming scarlet.

Grabbing the door's handle, I heaved. The series of bolts that secured the door groaned and bent, but it was the stonework that gave way first, bursting apart with a shower of rock dust. The door flew open, ripped free as the hinges sheared, and embedded itself into the wall.

"Torviir, Bolgar, you are dismissed," Varay said behind me. "I'll cover for you when he arrives."

I didn't need to turn around to know they'd obeyed as their heavy bootsteps and the clanging of their armor receded down the hall away from the prison cell.

Caera scrambled back against the wall but came up against the end of the length of chain that bound her mana suppression shackles to the floor. "G-Grey?" she asked, her voice cracking with dehydration and disuse.

Hurrying to her side, I took hold of the chains and ripped them off the shackles. Then, being careful not to hurt her in the process, I pried the manacles apart, freeing her wrists.

Wordlessly, I helped her up off the floor and led her slowly out of the cell.

"Grey…" Caera was looking up into my face, searching my eyes so intensely it felt like she was trying to make sure I was real. She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me into a shaky hug.

Then she pushed me away, glaring at me with an authority that channeled her mentor, the Scythe Seris Vritra, and slapped me across the cheek. "How *dare* you leave me imprisoned for—for—" She threw her hands up in frustration. "However long it's been! Where *were* you? Seris…is she?"

"I don't know anything yet," I said, frustration, guilt, and disappointment seething within me. "I just found out you were here ten minutes ago. What are you doing in Vildorial? In Dicathen? Seris should have known better, she—"

"She sent me to you for help," Caera said, her gaze skating off my face as she struggled to focus. "Things were not going as well as they could have been. She wanted…" Caera's face fell. "Vritra's horns, what will have happened to her? It's been so long."

I held her straight, leaning down slightly so I could look into her eyes. “I’m sorry, Caera,” I said again, anger beginning to bloom from the alchemy of my other emotions. “These dragons—”

A furious pressure built up so suddenly that my words caught in my throat. Caera, already weak from her long imprisonment, sagged back into my arms, and Varay had to steady herself on the wall, her legs trembling.

Aether flooded my muscles, reinforcing and steadying me so that when the dragon arrived at the end of the hall, I was standing as still as a statue, unbent.

Appearing in his humanoid form, Vajrakor was my height, but had a lithe build that belied his asuran strength. Flowing black hair tumbled around his shoulders, and eyes the color of lilacs met mine across the length of the hallway. He stopped short, his expression shifting from fury to surprise. He smoothed this away almost instantly, but not fast enough that I hadn’t seen it.

Straightening his loose-fitting robes, which were cut from rose quartz silk and embroidered in a soft purple thread that matched his eyes, Vajrakor lifted his chin and stepped forward at a more controlled pace. “Arthur Leywin. For weeks you’ve been absent from the face of the very continent you begged us to protect, and yet the first thing you do upon your return is help the enemy. Explain yourself.”

“The world is a messy shade of gray, where enemies can be allies, and allies”—I let a minute pause break up my words, holding Vajrakor’s gaze —“can be enemies.”

Helping Caera to stand straight, I took a step away. She was strong, and she forced herself up to her full height even under the weight of the dragon’s presence. Stepping past Varay, I approached Vajrakor, arranging my features into a businesslike smile and extending my hand. “Before we get into what I can only assume will be a heated argument, how about we show some level of courtesy, since it seems like we’ll be seeing each other quite frequently.”

Vajrakor made no move to take my hand. “There will be no argument, especially not with a lesser pretending to understand aether.”

“Yet Kezess seems to be very interested in what I pretend to know.”

“When you speak of him, you will do so appropriately. It is Lord Indrath.”

“Then as a courtesy to your Lord Indrath, I will let your unacceptable treatment of my friend pass this once, on the assumption that it was out of ignorance.” I stepped slightly closer, just too close to be polite. “Because if I were to believe that Lord Indrath’s *guardians* were taking my friends and allies as hostages and torturing them for information, then we'd have a problem.”

Vajrakor drew in a long breath, seeming to swell as he did so, blocking the hallway completely. “Windsom has told me much about you, Arthur Leywin, but try as he might, he could not fully express the depths of your arrogance, apparently. You are not my equal in this. Not in political stature, and certainly not in raw strength. I’m not done with that one yet, and you lack the power to take her from me.”

I smiled, showing my teeth. “Neither of us knows if that’s true, but only one of us is willing to find out. We both know what would happen to you, even if you fought and defeated me. You’re here because Kezess wants knowledge that I have. Does your baseless confidence extend to standing up against your own overlord?”

His facade of confidence cracked, just slightly, as a shadow of doubt passed over his face. “Such disrespect for those here to save you from an enemy that has already defeated you.”

“Respect?” Caera said, the word grinding out through clenched teeth. Slowly, she pushed herself up so she could stand straight as she addressed Vajrakor. “Is that what you’ve shown me here, monster?”

“Monster? You carry the filth of Agrona Vritra’s blood in your veins and call me monster?” He chuckled. “You can’t even see yourself for the perversion you are, lessuran.”

I cocked my head and narrowed my eyes at the dragon. “While I’ve enjoyed our short exchange, I have better things to do, so allow me to speak in the way you may best understand: If you wish to be my ally, you will step aside. Stand in my way, and I will consider you an enemy.”

Vajrakor’s lavender eyes grew bright with anger, but he moved aside, seeming to shrink as he did so. “The world is made up of shades of gray, indeed,” he sneered.

Pulling one of Caera’s arms around my shoulder to support her, I led her down the tunnel. “You dragons catch on quickly.” Varay moved like a shadow behind us.

“Lord Indrath will be most curious as to the reason for your unnecessary hostility. I’ll inform him of your return—and attitude—immediately,” the dragon said to my back.

“Send him my regards.”

5

FELLOWSHIP FORGED

VAJRAKOR'S PRESENCE receded with each step we took while Caera's strength returned bit by bit. Cramped tunnels gave way to sprawling, ornate halls, and finally to the open expanse of Vildorial's primary cavern. From the steps of the palace, the entire underground metropolis sprawled out before us.

Varay eyed me with an air of uncertainty, clearly second-guessing how I'd handled the altercation with the asura. "I'm going to make sure that Torviir and Bolgar are sufficiently insulated from this situation, then I have my own duties to attend to. Will you be in the city long?"

I glanced at Caera. "Probably not."

"Be careful, Arthur," she said, a small frown creasing her brow. "Despite winning back our continent, I can't help but feel as if Dicathen has never been in more danger than it is right now."

I let out a humorless laugh. "What's that saying about frying pans and fires?"

"Except in this case, it is dragon's fire," Varay said darkly. She held out her hand to Caera. When Caera took it, Varay pressed something into her palm. "I grabbed this when I heard Arthur was approaching the city. I know I'm only returning what is yours, but I want you to know that, if Arthur trusts

you, I do too.” Then her feet lifted off the ground and she flew out into the open cavern.

Caera slid an ornate ring onto her finger, her gaze shifting to me as she fidgeted anxiously. “I am…grateful that you came. And I apologize for striking you, I—”

I waved a hand dismissively. “I deserved worse. You never should have had to endure that, any of it.”

Silence fell between us, and I awkwardly started walking, trying to think of what else to say. I’d been forced to leave Alacrya without explanations or goodbyes; the last time I saw her, she still thought I was Ascender Grey. I wouldn’t blame her if she hated me for my lies, but I comforted myself with the fact that Seris knew the truth and had still sent Caera to find me.

“My mother is an emitter—a healer,” I said after a couple of minutes just to break the awkward silence. “She can mend your wounds.”

“My wounds aren’t important,” Caera said forcefully, then her mouth clamped shut and she looked away.

“I’m sorry,” I said, watching her from the corner of my eye. “For this, and for lying to you about my identity.”

“I suppose it makes us even,” she said humorlessly, still not looking at me.

A patrol of dwarven guards stopped to watch us, nervously fingering their weapons. I kept an eye on them until we had moved past and they resumed their march.

“Where were you?”

“The Relictombs are built in a dimension all made of aether. The zones just sort of…float, disconnected from everything in this vast aetheric ocean. I used that aether to bring back my old bond, Sylvie, the one who…”

“Who sacrificed herself for you? And you succeeded? In bringing her back, I mean.”

“I did.” I hesitated to continue, turning my senses inward to my aether core.

The broken shards of my original mana core were still fused together within a solid barrier of aether, an almost crystalline structure. The core had taken on a deep magenta color when I originally forged it but had darkened with each subsequent layer. Now, the three-layered core was a vivid purple sphere resting dark and heavy in my sternum. Each layer provided greater refinement of the stored aether and allowed more aether to be drawn in and held inside the core.

When I had first formed the aether core, I could hardly condense enough for a single aetheric blast. It had taken significant training and refinement of the core to allow for even two or three blasts, but adding a second layer had increased my capacity exponentially.

There hadn't been time to test what my core—and by extension, what I—was capable of now, but it felt different, more potent, like a miniature sun trapped in my chest.

Speaking falteringly, I continued, explaining what I had done and why. "Unfortunately, disconnected from the world, none of us were capable of sensing the passage of time."

"So you spent two months meditating and gathering aether?" Caera asked, dumbstruck. "Grey, that's…insane."

I rubbed the back of my neck, embarrassed. "Honestly, it was probably longer since time seems to move faster in the Relictombs."

Caera shook her head. "That's true. It could have been six months for all you know…" She let out a long, weary sigh. "You could have ended up not coming back at all."

We were interrupted by someone shouting my name, and I realized we were passing through one of the small markets that dotted the highway. A young elven girl ran up to me, pressed a dried flower into my hand, and then sprinted away, giggling. Most of those we had passed by simply stared at us, but the focus was always on Caera.

I had grown used to the horns wrapping around her head like a crown, but to the people of this continent, those horns made her look like an enemy.

“Why did Seris send you to Dicathen?” I asked, turning off the winding highway toward the gates of the Earthborn Institute. “And without your pendant to hide your horns?”

“She said she needs—needed you in Alacrya soon. But that was…”

“Two months ago,” I finished for her.

“I was attacked on my way to the tempus warp. An ally of Seris’s, another pupil, betrayed her,” she continued, her words dripping icy venom. “I was nearly captured, only just escaped Scythe Dragoth Vritra. I must have lost the pendant during the battle.”

“So,” I said slowly, letting the word linger in the air. “My friend Haedrig is dead then?”

Caera gave a startled laugh. “Oh my. I hadn’t even considered that.” Her momentary smile faded. She had dark circles under her eyes, and I could practically see her straining to keep them open. “Perhaps you were right. Seris shouldn’t have sent me here. You aren’t even Alacryan. What’s happened to your people, to your…family—you don’t owe us anything. If I’d known…”

I had still been supporting Caera’s weight while we walked, but now she pulled away from me. When she spoke again, it was with an air of resignation. “You have your own battles to fight, I understand that now. If you can just help me get back to Alacrya, I will—”

Gently taking hold of her forearm, I stopped. She did the same, her scarlet eyes full of questions.

“In that convergence zone, the first time we really met, I was just figuring out what was going on. I was ready to leave everyone there to die once I realized you were all Alacryan. You were enemies, and I thought you all had to be twisted, evil monsters. It was simpler for me to think that.” I took a deep breath. “Caera, you showed me the truth about this war. You and Alaric, Seth and Mayla, everyone I met who was just trying to get by on a continent darkened by Agrona’s shadow. You aren’t my enemy. The asuran tyrants who seek to mold this world into their own cruel little playgrounds—or worse, burn our world to the ground. *They* are our enemies.”

She gazed up at me for a moment, then gave a small shake of her head. “Does anything frighten you?”

I hung my head, suddenly ashamed. “I’m terrified, Caera. Of not being powerful enough, smart enough, clear-headed enough. But most of all, I’m scared of losing. Too many people already look up to me like I’m some kind of deity. I just need you to be…my friend.”

Her eyes searched mine for a long moment, her lips slightly pursed, and then she heaved a long, melodramatic sigh. “Fine, fine. And here I was, all ready to start the first Temple of Grey, He Who Walks Among Us.”

I snorted but couldn’t hide my smile as we started walking away. “I’m glad you’ve managed to retain your sense of humor through everything.”

Caera’s laughter died on her lips, her face darkening. “The dragon’s idea of torture was little worse than what any Alacryan child faces when they begin training for their trials.” But each step she took was heavy, and I knew she was hurting more than she let on.

My amusement shriveled within me.

We didn’t speak anymore until we reached the unassuming door that led into my mother and sister’s home in Vildorial, a small suite of rooms within the Earthborn Institute itself. The door opened before I could knock. Sylvie smiled and stood aside, waving us in.

“Your sister had me paranoid you were going to vanish,” she said lightly. “I think she’s planning to shackle herself to you so you can’t leave her behind again.”

“Sylvie!” Ellie yelled from across the room, indignant. “That was supposed to be a secret.”

I led the way in and scooped Ellie into a bearhug. “Does that mean you’re not mad at me anymore?” I asked, crushing her to me.

“Irate,” she gasped, squirming to get free. “Oh, hi Lady Caera, glad my goon of a brother was able to get you out of there.”

I started to release her, frowning. “Did I miss something? How do you—”

Suddenly, Ellie stiffly pulled loose of my grip. She straightened her clothes and looked past me. I followed her gaze to Chul, who had appeared in the doorway behind Caera and me. My brows rose.

“Um, hi,” Ellie said, brushing past me and holding out her hand to the half-asura. His hand engulfed hers. “We didn’t get introduced earlier. I’m Eleanor Leywin.”

“Chul,” he said politely as he scanned the small living room.

“You have really pretty eyes,” she added, staring up into the orange and blue orbs.

He looked away and released her hand. “They are like battle flags, proudly displaying to the world that I am descended from the phoenix and djinn races. Our enemies should tremble at the sight of them.”

“Um, of course,” she said, taking a step back and smiling awkwardly. She walked backward for a few more steps, then turned and marched into the kitchen. “Mom, Arthur is here with more company!”

Regis, who was lying on his side on the floor, his stomach distended, rolled onto his feet to give Caera a small bow. “M’lady. Glad to see you embracing your horns. The trio, back together again at last.”

Sylvie appeared from the kitchen arch wearing an uncertain smile, caught halfway between amused and uncomfortable. “What’s he—oh, really now! Regis! Don’t be crass.”

Just as I was beginning to regret all my life decisions, my mother appeared. She gave me a peck on the cheek as if to assure me that everything would, in fact, be all right, then stiffened at the sight of Caera. “Oh, dear, look at you!” She whisked across the room to Caera’s side, slipped her arm around the startled Alacryan, and then glared at me. “Arthur Leywin! How dare you drag this young woman around the city in this state.”

I opened my mouth to defend myself against this unfair accusation, second-guessed the impulse, and let my mouth slowly close.

“Come on, let’s get you cleaned and patched up,” Mom said, leading Caera toward the hallway that connected to the bedrooms and bath.

“Oh, I’m fine, Mrs. Leywin, seriously, there’s no need to—”

“Call me Alice, dear, remember?”

Caera threw me an uncertain look, but I could only mirror her look back as Mom led her deeper into the rooms. A litany of concerned muttering trailed behind them.

“How’d you…?”

“Oh, Mom was called in to heal Caera’s wounds when she first arrived,” Ellie said conversationally. “When I heard she supposedly knew you, I went to see if it was true. She’s, ah, pretty cool.” Something about the way Ellie looked at me as she drew out the word “cool” made me squirm uncomfortably.

“What an amusing family you have,” Chul chimed in. He made his way to the couch and eased down on it, testing its strength to make sure it would hold him. When it didn’t collapse, he nodded in satisfaction. “I have looked around this city and decided I have seen enough. Everyone stares at me and there are no enemies to bash. Unless you count the dragons, which I understand are off limits for now. So, when do we start killing basilisks?”

Ellie returned from the kitchen and leaned against the archway. “So, you’re all definitely going to Alacrya then?”

“Our first point of business is to rescue Seris,” Regis said, sitting up and looking serious. “If there is anything left of her little rebellion to save.”

“We are, but we can’t just run off. Caera needs time to rest, and we need to get organized.” I paused, following the progress of a powerful aura approaching us. “There is still a lot I need to wrap my head around. I won’t feel right about leaving the continent until I know certain wheels are in motion.”

“My grandfather will be furious that you didn’t bring me to him immediately,” Sylvie mused.

I shrugged, already heading toward the door. “I don’t think trying to ingratiate ourselves with Kezess is a winning strategy in any situation,” I said over my shoulder.

Opening the door, I looked out into the hallway just as Wren Kain floated around the corner on his stone chair. The titan always wore a look of fused irritation and disappointment, but now he displayed both in abundance.

“Yeah, that’s about how my meeting with the city’s guardian left me feeling, too,” I said, commiserating with Wren Kain’s mood.

“Still more enjoyable than being forced to train an idiot lesser child,” he snapped, pulling up short in his floating throne, which took up most of the hall’s width. His eyes narrowed. “I can see you have something on your mind. What is it you’re planning?”

Chul appeared behind me. One big fist hammered against his chest in a kind of salute. “Elder Wren Kain, fourth of your name, welcome to the strange, claustrophobic abode of Clan Leywin. There will be a great many things here for you to complain about, I’m sure.”

“Complaining is how I get things done,” Wren countered, leaning back further into his throne.

“If you really wanted to help, you would join us in crushing the Vritra,” Chul went on. “Aldir said you can control an entire army of golems at once. That would be a useful ability when we face Agrona’s forces.”

“If Arthur was eager for help in combat, perhaps he shouldn’t have executed one of Epheotus’s greatest warriors,” Wren shot back, the emotion in his voice surprisingly raw and visceral.

“I didn’t,” I answered quietly. It was one thing to keep up the lie for Mordain and an audience of phoenixes, but an entirely other thing to continue lying to Wren, especially considering what I needed to ask him. “Aldir chose to exile himself in that place. It was his suggestion that I use his ‘death’ to earn accolades from both Kezess and the people of Dicathen.”

“Wha—” Wren cut himself off, glowering at me. “Your story stinks more than titan bear shit. Why would Aldir do that?” The asura huffed before I could answer, then said, “Ah, that damned pantheon and his sense of *honor*. Of course he did.” He looked me up and down with a disappointed grimace. “I was stupid to believe that you’d somehow killed Aldir anyway.”

“Thanks,” I said, one brow raised slightly. “I’m sorry I had to lie to you, Wren. I wasn’t sure if I could trust everyone in the Hearth.”

“Bah!” Chul burst out, crossing his massive arms over his broad chest. “My family has roosted for too long. None of them would have interfered either way. They see themselves as separate from the world. And perhaps they are, because they have been made to be, no longer welcome in Epheotus but not fitting in here. The Hearth might as well be locked in time. Once the last of the djinn faded…”

Chul trailed off, then snorted and returned to my family’s rooms.

“Listen, Wren, I need to speak to you. Would you come with me?” I asked, glad to have cleared the air between us so that I could speak my mind more plainly.

Wren’s scraggy brows rose, and he leaned forward in his seat. “So, you *do* have something on your mind. Fine, lead the way.”

I sent a probing thought to Regis and Sylvie.

Regis groaned directly into my mind in a way I found somewhat grotesque. *‘Too full, I might have ruptured something. Staying right where I’m at, thanks.’*

‘I want to speak more with Ellie,’ Sylvie thought. *‘I’m eager to learn more about her spellform.’*

I’ll be back soon, I thought, leading Wren deeper into the institute's winding passages.

We hadn’t gone far before a bestial snuffling noise brought me up short. A huge, hairy mana beast was approaching along the hallway, so broad he took up nearly the entire width.

“Boo, I was wondering where you’d been,” I said, standing aside to let the guardian bear pass.

He snorted and grunted before stopping to sniff at Wren, who made his throne shrink in order to clear the way.

“Windsom’s gift to your sister, I presume,” Wren noted, peering appraisingly at Boo. “He seems to have been handled well. A strong bond for a teenage human.”

Boo let out a huff that blew Wren’s hair back, then continued down the hallway, his bulk shifting from side to side with each step.

I considered what Wren had said. It was easy to forget that Windsom had gifted Boo to Ellie. So much had changed since then, it was difficult to think that Windsom had ever been anything but my enemy.

“So what’s your plan exactly?” Wren asked a minute later as we made our way down into the lower passages of the Earthborn Institute.

I had to think about this before I could respond. I’d expected to spend some time navigating the new power dynamic of the dragons embedded throughout Dicathen. Mordain’s warning was still fresh in my mind, and I needed to know the people of the continent were safe. Finding Caera in Vildorial had shifted my priorities, however.

“I need to know what’s happening in Alacrya.”

“So you’ll go yourself.” Wren picked at the ends of his messy hair, frowning thoughtfully. “You’ll need eyes and ears here in Dicathen, though. Who do you trust?”

This question also required some thought. “Virion Eralith. He’s dealt with asuras before. Even Aldir never cowed him. And the other Lances. To be honest, as a group we were pretty self-absorbed and insufficient during the war, but I’ve seen how much Bairon and Mica have changed. I can’t see any of them being subservient to an asura like Vajrakor.”

“Is that it?” Wren asked, derision dripping from the words. “I’d expected better of you.”

“In less dire circumstances, I would say there are many others I trust. Considering who we’re up against…” I let the statement hang in the air, then continued. “I need your mind, Wren. I don’t think I can do this without you.”

“Intriguing. Do go on.”

“Once I’ve introduced you to your new team.”

A few minutes later, we entered the door of one of several underground laboratories within the Earthborn Institute. The room was more cluttered than the last time I’d visited, with stacks of parchment spread over every surface. Several more tables and shelves had been brought in, and a wide variety of hand-drawn diagrams covered the walls. I couldn’t even begin to take it all in.

Emily Watsken, her curly hair pulled into a messy knot at the back of her head, looked up from her work, and her eyes went so wide they nearly eclipsed the thick, round glasses she wore. “Arthur!”

Her shout immediately preceded the noise of a body part cracking against something hard, which was followed closely by a pained curse and then an explosion. Parchment flew everywhere, and the lab began to fill with smoke.

A figure stepped out through the haze, his eyebrows smoldering. Burning parchment rained around him. “Well, if it isn’t the bane of my existence. Where did you vanish to this time? Land of the gods? A secret third continent full of magical talking lemons?”

“Ugh, that’s the third time I’ve transcribed those notes!” Emily whined.

Something began emitting an angry buzz, and the smoke was pulled to one corner. The room quickly cleared, and I realized an artifact in the corner had drawn in all the smoke. Emily was standing next to the artifact, empowering it with mana. She waved, her hand smudged with dark stains. “Don’t take it personally, Arthur. He’s glad to see you. In fact, he’s been practically distraught at your absence, as its—”

“Oh, be quiet, Watsken,” Gideon snapped, scowling at his pupil. “Anyway, now that you’re back, there are several things to discuss. First, though, who is this?” He looked suspiciously at Wren.

Wren was inspecting a nearby diagram. “Huh, this isn’t the worst. A little rudimentary in its use of mana, but the idea itself is almost clever.”

“Gideon, this is Wren Kain IV. He’s—”

“An asura, obviously,” Gideon interrupted waspishly. “What do you mean, rudimentary?”

I stepped in between them. “I don’t have time to waste on you two comparing the size of your beakers. Have the dragons interfered at all with your work?”

Gideon managed to look both insulted and self-satisfied. “No, I’ve kept our primary purpose quiet, using the fire salt-imbued weaponry as cover. Windsom himself came to investigate, since he knew me from the war, but he barely looked at the weapons before writing them off as inconsequential and leaving me to it. I don’t think these dragons of yours have much respect for us *lessers*.”

“Weapons?” Wren turned away from the diagrams, looking genuinely interested. “What’s this about then?”

I explained what we’d already developed. Gideon put in technical details here and there, and Emily made it a point to correct us both when necessary. “But the dragons’ arrival has made this even more pressing. Empowering our mages is important, but they make up only one percent of Dicathen’s population. Weapons alone aren’t going to be enough, not really.”

Thinking it through even as I attempted to explain it, I laid out my idea. The others only interrupted to ask a question or point out some contradiction as I circled around my purpose, but confusion and skepticism quickly transformed into interest and then, dare I say it, even excitement.

“It’ll never let a magicless lesser stand up against an Indrath Clan warrior,” Wren said after the entire idea had been laid out. “But it would make Dicathen less dependent on old Kezess.”

“And less subject to his threats to abandon us,” I finished. “Can you handle this? It’ll need to be kept quiet from Vajrakor and the rest of the dragons, of course.”

Wren and Gideon exchanged a look that sent a shiver of pure horror down my spine as I wondered what I had wrought on the world by introducing the two.

Emily’s expression mirrored my own feelings, and she mouthed the words, “What have you done?”

“I’ve been forging weapons since before this continent had a name,” Wren said smugly. “Whelps like Vajrakor and the rest of these baby dragons don’t scare me.”

Gideon snorted. “It seems like you’ve brought me an able assistant, boy. I’m sure we’ll manage. Or blow up half of Vildorial in the process. Now, we should really talk about—”

“No time now,” I interrupted, backing toward the door. “When I get back.”

“You just *got* back,” Gideon grumbled, throwing up his hands.

“Well, bye then,” Emily said from across the room, waving weakly.

I raised my hand in a gesture of farewell, then was out in the hall and already hurrying back to my mother’s rooms. Despite the urgency of everything that needed to be done, I felt a sense of peace. I could see it all laid out in front of me like a Sovereign’s Quarrel board and, at least for the moment, I knew what move came next.

6

ENTOURAGE

“ALL I CAN SAY with certainty is that Sehz-Clar fell, but Seris escaped,” Caera said. “This knowledge was provided by Lyra of Highblood Dreide before the dragons arrived and may be weeks out of date.”

“But we can use this to get anywhere, right?” Ellie asked, indicating the heavy chunk of hammered metal that looked vaguely similar to a blacksmith’s anvil.

“Almost anywhere, yes,” Caera confirmed. Her index finger tapped on her lips as she considered the tempus warp, which I had acquired from the Wraiths. “But that only helps us if we know where we’re going.”

“Why not go straight for the throat?” Chul leaned forward on his elbows, his orange eye gleaming with an internal fire. “We can use this to go anywhere, you say? So we could attack Agrona directly.”

“*Almost* anywhere,” Caera repeated. “Taegrin Caelum is an impenetrable fortress guarded by Vritra magic and technology.”

“My grandfather sent an entire force of asuras to assassinate Agrona, and they failed,” Sylvie added. “We don’t know how or why. Until we do, it’s too risky to face Agrona directly, especially in the seat of his power.”

Silence fell around the table. The only sound was of Boo, who was sitting in one corner grooming himself loudly. A day had passed since our arrival in Vildorial. Caera, Chul, Ellie, Sylvie, Regis, and I sat around a large table with the tempus warp resting between us. We were deep under the Earthborn Institute in a chamber that was shielded against both sound and mana, so even Vajrakor would have a hard time spying on us if he was motivated to do so.

I pointed at Caera, thinking over what she'd said. "But Lyra Dreide might know more. I don't trust Vajrakor enough to go to him for information, but it makes sense that Lyra's been keeping an eye on Alacrya. If Seris's efforts are in any way being made in the public eye, then we might be able to figure out where to start."

"Vajrakor had considered locking her up as well," Caera said, a bitter edge creeping into her tone. "He was musing about it one day while pressing me for information, trying to use her continued freedom against me. Apparently he banned her from traveling and threatened to burn the Alacryan encampments—and the Alacryans in them—if she didn't comply. I know she gave him some information because he then used me to verify it, but I can't be sure that he wasn't just attempting to manipulate me further."

"More Alacryans?" Chul stood up from the table and turned his back on us. "We blend the lines of ally and enemy too much."

"Careful there, wise one, you're sounding an awful lot like Vajrakor," Regis japed.

Chul stared at Regis for a long moment, seeming to roll this thought around, then returned to his seat. "So I am."

There was a knock at the stone double doors that led into the room, causing Boo to let out a low growl.

Activating Realmheart, I verified the mana signatures of those beyond, then opened the doors and allowed Gideon and Wren Kain in. Mica was approaching just behind them, and I held the door open for her as well. Wren immediately slumped into a chair that grew up out of the ground for him even as he sat in it, while Gideon found a seat at the table.

Mica leaned against the back wall with a frown carved across her face. She had abandoned the uniform of the Lance in favor of simple dwarven armor and a heavy fur cloak that added to her bulk, disguising her childlike frame. A black gem shone from within her left eye socket.

I stepped out of the room, closing the door behind me to ensure the seal remained intact, and waited for the rest to join us.

Varay was the next to arrive. We exchanged a few polite words, and I let her into the meeting chamber.

My mother looked incredibly nervous when she turned the corner into the hall, but relaxed when she saw me. Pulling me into a hug, she kissed me on the cheek and then looked searchingly into my eyes. “Arthur, what’s this all about? I’m not made for sneaking around.”

I couldn’t help but grin. “You’ve survived being an adventurer, a front-line medic in the war, and *my* mother.”

She rolled her eyes and swatted me playfully. “That’s true, I suppose. It’s a wonder all my hair hasn’t gone gray and fallen out,” she said, plucking at a length of gray among her auburn locks.

“Before you go in…” I withdrew something from my dimension rune and held it out to her. “I’ve thought about this a lot, and I want you to have this.”

She carefully plucked the milky white stone from my palm, turning it over to look at the many facets. “What is it?”

“Do you remember that ring Vincent Helsea gave you when I started adventuring?” I asked. “It’s kind of like that, except…well, if you’re able to use it, you should be able to check on me or Ellie and see exactly what we’re doing. I thought…I didn’t want you to have to worry. Unless of course you turn it on and find me being ripped apart by angry aetheric monsters,” I added.

My mother’s cheeks paled at my joke, and she pressed the stone back on me. “Maybe it’s best that—”

“Sorry,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “Honestly, it’d make me feel a lot better if you kept it. I’ve only been able to use it to see you and Ellie anyway, and if Ellie is with me…”

She sighed and took hold of it with both hands. “Okay, what do I do?”

I’d already given this some thought since I used aether to activate it. Although it took time to recharge after each use, it drew in its own aether, so it was only a matter of triggering it. “Just send in a burst of healing magic. When it touches your mind, think about Ellie.”

“Should I…?”

I nodded, and Mom closed her eyes and imbued the relic. I watched as her healing magic interacted with the aether in the atmosphere, drawing it to the relic, then as the vivum-aligned tendrils reached out to her in response.

“Oh,” she said softly. The connection cut off and her eyes blinked open. “I could see her speaking with Chul.” Her eyes jumped to the closed doors. “Inside that room. Oh, thank you.” She pulled me into another hug.

“It takes a few days to be used again, so you won’t be able to watch us every step of the way,” I explained.

“That’s probably a good thing,” she replied, staring down at the stone and turning it over and over in her hands. A small smile played across her face. “I’m not sure I’m strong enough to resist the urge of checking to make sure you’re okay every five seconds, and I have far too much to do for me to lose myself to this artifact.”

Behind her, the final guests entered the hall. She waved at Virion and Bairon, then I let her into the meeting chamber.

Virion put his hands on my shoulders and looked me up and down. The old elf was unchanged physically, but it was clear that the events of the last couple of years had drained him of the exuberance and vitality he had once possessed in abundance. “It’s strange. Sometimes, when it’s been awhile since I’ve seen you, I almost expect to find that sixteen-year-old boy waiting for me.” His smile faltered, and he patted my cheek. “Then I see this hair, these eyes, this face, and I wonder if it can really be you.”

“Don’t get sentimental on me, Gramps,” I teased, although my heart wasn’t in it. “There’s…a lot to catch you up on.”

“Brat,” he muttered, and together, we entered the chamber. There was an ominous finality in the *thud* of the heavy door closing behind us.

My gaze tracked across everyone there, all the people I trusted most, even against the manipulative power and authority of Kezess Indrath. “Thank you for coming, everyone. This won’t take long.” I took a moment to introduce everyone for the benefit of those who didn’t know each other.

“I have news, and I have a request,” I said when that was finished. Not intending to make too much of a ceremony over it, I withdrew Silverlight, Aldir’s sword, from my dimension rune and held it up. “This weapon belonged to the pantheon asura, Aldir.”

The reaction was immediate. Varay and Mica exchange a wary look, while Virion stiffened, his jaw clenching.

“Aldir was the asura responsible for the destruction of Elenoir. That crime has now been punished. Aldir will never harm another human, elf, or dwarf, and I carry his weapon as proof.”

Locking eyes with Virion, I maneuvered around the table until I was standing right in front of him. Carefully, I held out the silver rapier with both hands. Fingers trembling, he reached for it.

His flesh passed through the solid metal as if it were a reflection on water. Ripples ran through the silver, and with each undulation the rapier dissolved further until nothing remained but light. Before I could react, the light condensed into a single point, like a silver star, and then flashed across the room.

It swerved past Wren’s face, then zipped at Varay, turning aside just before striking her chest. Bairon jerked away as it skimmed the crown of his head, then it shot at Mica.

Finally, so fast even I didn’t have time to intercede, it struck Ellie in her sternum. My sister was rocked backward, her body slamming into Boo—who had rushed to her side the moment the star began zipping around—and his bulk cushioned her.

Mother let out a choked gasp, and the Lances had weapons and spells at the ready, Bairon holding Taci's red spear out toward my sister as if afraid she might attack.

With one hand, Ellie was rubbing at her sternum, appearing more in shock than pain. In her other hand, silver light was flowing into the shape of a long, bent staff.

"Ellie, are you okay?" Mother asked, already channeling a healing spell.

"Y-yeah, just…startled," she said, still checking herself over to be certain her words were true.

"Oh, put that away," Wren scolded Bairon, who in turn shot the titan a distrusting glance. "Unless you plan on sparring with the Leywin child and her new weapon."

I homed in on Wren, who wore an amused and yet still irritated expression. "What?"

"Silverlight has chosen the girl for whatever reason. An asura's weapon is bonded to them. Sometimes it will allow no other master; other times the dying asura may release it to find a new hand to carry it. A weak bond may be overcome by a strong enough spirit." As he said this, he indicated the red spear still clutched in Bairon's fists.

Mica's focus lingered on the bent staff. "So, what, we're just handing asuran weapons to children now?"

Mom scowled at Mica but said nothing.

"It doesn't look like much of a weapon to me," Chul chimed in, bending closer to inspect the staff.

"It's a bow," Ellie answered.

As Boo sniffed at it, I realized Ellie was right. What I'd mistaken for a curved staff was the body of an unstrung bow.

"In this case, Silverlight has always been malleable by nature. She has chosen young Eleanor to wield her, and in doing so taken on the form that will be most useful. You should be proud to have been found worthy by

such a weapon," Wren concluded, his gaze bearing heavily down on my sister.

Ellie's eyes were wide as full moons and nearly the same color as they reflected the silver gleam of the asuran artifact. This wasn't exactly what I'd intended, but I couldn't pretend not to be pleased that she would have such a powerful weapon. "But there is no string."

"I said Silverlight recognizes you as worthy. As for ready…" Wren shrugged carelessly.

Boo gave a grunt as if to disagree with Silverlight's judgment before returning to his corner. Sylvie patted his rump consolingly as he went by.

I returned my attention to Virion, as I wasn't finished with my news yet. His gaze was distant, pointed in the direction of the shimmering bow but not focused on it.

"Are you all right?"

"You've provided justice, Arthur, and I thank you for it." He let out a breathy laugh, but it was almost a sob. "And yet, it feels so shallow."

My brows creased in confusion. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"I know that, for the people of Dicathen to stand united, this needed to be done," he replied softly, "but perhaps I didn't truly wish for Aldir, whom I once respected greatly, to perish. Can one death ever truly make up for millions?"

I wished then that I could tell him the truth of what had happened, but I knew it would only undercut anything that might be gained by Aldir's sacrifice. "Maybe it's true that justice can never end in death, or it becomes vengeance instead. In that case, perhaps this can be the true justice your people—*our* people need."

I swallowed heavily, nodded, and withdrew another object. Setting the small box on the table, I pushed it toward Virion. He took it delicately, opening the lid as if afraid it might shatter. His heavy brows knit together, the harsh lines of such heavy emotions smoothing into simple curiosity.

“This soil is from Mount Geolus in Epheotus,” I explained. “I’m told it’s capable of growing plants anywhere—even somewhere destroyed by the World Eater technique.”

With one trembling digit, Virion reached for the dirt, but he did not touch it. When he met my eyes again, there was a clear and desperate need written in them. “Truly?”

Sylvie shifted in her seat. “It’s difficult to describe to anyone who hasn’t seen Epheotus, but according to asuran history, the soil of Mount Geolus spread life to the entire realm.”

Virion’s face was turned toward the table, and a tear dropped from his nose to splash against the stone. Bairon rested a hand on Virion’s back, his gaze drooping helplessly.

When Virion finally looked up, his eyes were red but empty of tears. He had to clear his throat before speaking. “It is this, life rather than death, that might bring hope to the elves, as it has brought hope—for so long a distant and unreachable thing—into my heart. Thank you.”

“Good. Well, then.” I paused, searching for what I was trying to say.

Wren had made his way around the table and was whispering in Ellie’s ear. My sister was concentrating very hard on the staff in her hands, but it didn’t seem to be responding. She let out a loud sigh, then hurriedly slapped her hand over her mouth in embarrassment.

“There is another reason I’ve asked all of you to be here,” I continued. “As part of my deal with Kezess, he has sent dragons to Dicathen to protect the people from Agrona. Things are never as simple as that, though, when dealing with asura.”

Varay was the first to respond. “You’re worried about the dragons manipulating public support in favor of Kezess instead of our own leaders—such as you.”

I let my response simmer for a moment, not wanting to misspeak considering the potentially dire circumstances. “I’ve never desired to become ruler of Dicathen, not as king or regent or anything else. But if the dragons gain enough sway over the citizens, Kezess will use it against us.

The people may not see it now, but there would be very little difference between life under Kezess's rule than under Agrona's."

Everyone was nodding along as I spoke. I hadn't expected any dissent, but I was still glad not to be taken by surprise. "Dicathen needs not only hope, but strength. We need to empower humans, dwarves, and elves alike so that their only choice isn't to bow to whatever higher power they see as the lesser evil. Which is why Wren Kain IV"—I indicated Wren, who was still standing beside Ellie—"is going to be working on my behalf to ensure we are capable of doing just that. I'm asking that you help him and Gideon in any way they need."

"Help them how?" Bairon asked, the first words he'd uttered since his arrival.

Sparing them too many extraneous details, I explained some of what Gideon and Wren would be attempting to accomplish, as well as how I expected Kezess to proceed with this new phase of the war. There were several questions, but after a few minutes I started pushing these questions to Wren, hoping to establish some kind of rapport between the groups.

"We'll do what we can," Virion said as the conversation began cooling down. "The dragons have hardly acknowledged me, but the elves still see me as their de facto leader for the moment. Those that are left."

Mica leaned away from the wall and strode up to the table. She rested her elbows on it and leaned forward, her steely gaze jumping from me to Wren. "If we're working to ensure these dragons don't make slaves of us all, then you know I'm in."

Varay said nothing, but she didn't need to.

I stood, and everyone else followed suit. "We're leaving immediately. If Vajrakor or the others come looking for me, there is no need to hide where I've gone. Do your best to maintain good relations with the dragons. Keep their focus on me; don't bring attention to yourselves if you can avoid it."

I opened the doors, and Virion strode out first, clutching the box tightly in both hands. He gave me a small nod and a distant smile, an expression that made him look as old as he was.

Bairon followed right behind him. “Don’t take a year this time, eh?”

“Only a couple of months.”

Bairon frowned at my attempted joke. “Farewell, Arthur.”

Behind him, Mica adjusted her cloak and levered her thumbs into her belt. “Just go do what you need to, all right? I’ll take care of things here.”

Varay rested her hand on my arm for just a moment, then followed the other Lances out.

“Don’t die, kid, as that would be incredibly inconvenient,” Gideon grumbled, marching past with barely a look in my direction.

Wren’s chair had disconnected from the ground and was floating along in Gideon’s wake with Wren lounging atop it. Instead of addressing me as he left, he focused on my sister. “Don’t overdo it with that weapon. Just because it has chosen you doesn’t mean it won’t burn you up if you invest too much of yourself in it.”

I bit my tongue, avoiding the impulse to pile on the warnings.

Besides those coming with me, only my mother lingered, her arm around Ellie’s waist, looking increasingly nervous.

Knowing we would need to move quickly, I had already seen to all the necessary preparations for an extended journey, which were safely stored inside my dimension rune.

Wasting no more time, I activated the tempus warp. The artifact gave off a warm glow as it opened an opaque portal next to the table, hanging like an oil spill in the air. “Regis, you go first.”

Regis leapt into the portal without hesitation.

Chul didn’t wait for me to send the next person through. Instead, he loudly proclaimed, “Like the spears of war, smoky dog and I will clear the path for our comrades,” then he too was gone.

Caera and Sylvie hurried through behind him. When it was Ellie’s turn, Mom gave her a big hug and took a step back. Ellie shot me two thumbs up

before skipping into the portal, and Boo trundled in just behind her.

“I can’t say how long we’ll be gone,” I told my mother, putting one arm around her in a quick side-hug.

“Well, at least I’ve got the stone thing,” she said, smiling in a way that I didn’t find entirely convincing.

“The Orb of Long-Ranged Stalking,” I said, suppressing a grin at her expression. “Bye, Mom. And be careful.”

“You too, Arthur.” She gave me one last firm squeeze, then stepped back, standing tall and maintaining her determined expression as she watched me confidently. It was enough to push me on, even though I hated leaving her behind yet again.

Drawing the tempus warp into my dimension rune, I stepped through the portal.

The transition was seamless. I stepped from within the underground chamber in Vildorial and out into bright sunshine. A cool breeze was blowing from the north, bringing with it the smell of ash. Beneath our feet was a smooth, cobbled path. We had arrived in the first of a series of encampments that skirted the border between the Elenoir Wastes and the Beast Glades.

The portal faded out behind me as I took in our surroundings. Simple, square buildings had been erected in rough rows along the path. They were grayish-brown, and I suspected the bricks that formed them had been made out of the ash.

A large number of Alacryans were watching us warily. Most wore simple tunics and breeches, and they were almost all covered in ash from whatever work they’d been doing that morning. I was immediately struck by how *normal* they looked without their black and red armor or their runic tattoos proudly displayed. They could have been farmers or miners from any village in Sapin.

“We’re looking for Lyra of Highblood Dreide,” I announced, scanning the crowd.

Many of the Alacryans exchanged looks with their neighbors, and a few whispered among themselves, their words too quiet for me to pick up.

A bald man with a thin, patchy beard and a dark smudge across his cheek stuck the shovel he was carrying into the ground. “Lady Lyra will be here soon. She does her rounds every day, making sure things are in order and everyone has what they need.” There was a bitterness in his voice that didn’t seem targeted at Lyra.

“She visits every encampment each day?” I asked, surprised.

“Unlike the person who sent us here to barely survive in this wasteland,” the man said, meeting my eye and spitting on the ground.

“Thoren!” a middle-aged woman scolded, glancing at me fearfully. “Forgive him, Regent. We appreciate what you’ve done for us! But not everyone transitions from the life of a soldier to being a hunter or farmer easily.”

I stepped up to the Alacryan she’d called Thoren, my expression level but stern. “I understand your frustration, but I’m certain you can agree with me that this is better than the inside of a prison cell—or the bottom of a shallow grave.” My gaze swept across our surroundings, taking in the signs of life and community in the once-desolate land. “The fact that you’ve been so successful in carving out a chance at survival here, under the guidance of the one Alacryan leader who has shown that she cares for your wellbeing, tells me I made the right decision.”

The man stared at the ground. “Yes, well, I suppose when you put it like that.” He marched away without another word, his shoulders hunched and shovel held like a spear.

“What’s going on here—Regent Leywin!” a honey-rich voice said. Turning around, I found the once-retainer, Lyra Dreide, striding confidently along the pathway in our direction. Her flame-red hair spilled down over her shoulders, standing out in stark contrast against the plain, rustic clothes she’d adopted. “Ah, and Lady Caera as well. I’ll admit, I feared for you in the clutches of that beast, Vajrakor.”

“Retainer Lyra,” Caera said, giving the other Alacryan a small smile. “We are actually here looking for you.”

The crowd around us broke up as the Alacryans went back to their duties, and Lyra gestured for us to follow her. We walked along between the rows of buildings. Most had planters full of herbs out front, and I saw where two wells had been erected. Everything was geared toward purpose; nothing appeared to be ornamental.

And all of it, everything, was colorless. Even the ground, where no grass grew, was just a darker shade of gray against the lighter cobblestone path. To our right, the horizon grew dark with greenery from the Beast Glades. Rows of raised-bed farming plots broke up the landscape. Dozens of Alacryans were hard at work hauling soil and water, minding crops, and erecting new beds with a combination of physical and magical labor. Beyond them, several mages stood guard facing the Beast Glades.

On the other side of the village, the northward horizon simply vanished in a heat haze above rolling gray hills.

“Not exactly a great view, is it?” Lyra mused, following my line of sight. “Still, we’ve done quite well here. There is a certain…peace to it.”

A keening cry suddenly interrupted the rustic silence, and it took me a moment to recognize the sound.

“A baby,” Sylvie said, arriving at that conclusion a moment before I did.

Lyra smiled and brushed the bright hair from her face. “Our first. An Alacryan child born on Dicathian soil. What exactly does that make him, Regent?”

I didn’t know, but Lyra saved me the trouble of struggling for an answer. “Our presence draws a steady supply of edible mana beasts out of the Beast Glades, and we have found several moon oxen that must have been far enough south when…and we’ve managed to start a few crops with seed sent by that Helen Shard woman. Yes, I’d say we’ve done as well as could be hoped, considering.”

Turning south, Lyra led us away from the settlement and toward the edge of the forest that marked where the Elenoir Wastes ended and the Beast Glades

began. Clusters of yellow grass grew up here and there, and then a few sparse, living trees among the black remains of many more dead ones. It wasn't until we approached within a few hundred feet of the denser forest that she stopped beneath the outstretched limbs of a dying tree.

"You've brought an entourage," she said, standing with her hands on her hips. "Eleanor, my apologies for not saying so earlier, but I am glad to see you, of course. And Regis, you too, I suppose. But who are these others?"

"I am Chul." The half-asura crossed his arms over his chest and looked down his nose at Lyra. "I cannot say I am pleased to meet an Alacryan, but Arthur considers you an ally, so I must do the same."

"And this is my bond, Lady Sylvie of Clan Indrath," I continued.

"Indrath…" Lyra's eyes widened as she stared at Sylvie. "Oh my, I…" She glanced between us, perhaps the only time I'd ever seen her at a loss for words. "Well, these are strange times. But it is of course a pleasure to meet you, Lady Sylvie."

"Just Sylvie," she said. "I'm about as much an Indrath at the moment as Chul."

Chul snorted, turning away.

Lyra chuckled, relaxing. "So, why are you here?"

"Retainer Lyra, we need to know what's become of Scythe Seris," Caera said into the silence that followed.

Lyra bit her lip, frowning. "I'm not surprised you hadn't heard. I'll tell you what I can."

Activating a dimension artifact, she withdrew a large roll of parchment. The ash between us expanded upward and out, forming a table, and she laid out the parchment to reveal a map of Alacrya. It was covered with notes. A few more pieces of parchment appeared from the dimension artifact, and she set these strategically around the map.

The Legacy, we learned, had torn down the shield around Sehz-Clar and cornered Seris. In typical fashion for her, however, she was ready for

Cecilia, broadcasting the confrontation for the entire continent to see.

“But then, and this was a true stroke of genius, her forces attacked the Relictombs and took over the second level, somehow blocking the ascension portals and preventing anyone else from entering,” Lyra explained, her voice rich with awe.

“No,” Caera gasped, her hand covering her mouth. “She had speculated such a thing was possible, but I never thought…”

Lyra held up a scroll that I recognized as an artifact to transmit messages over great distances. “Indeed. My sources are a couple of weeks old, but there has been no news from the Relictombs since she first took them several weeks ago. If I know anything about the High Sovereign, I think it is likely he is simply waiting her out. The second level has no crops or industry. No matter how well prepared she was, she can’t host her rebellion within the Relictombs indefinitely.”

I felt Sylvie’s confusion bubble up through our connection as she tried to get a grasp on everything being said. Regis took the lead in filling in the gaps for her while I focused on Lyra.

“We need to get to Alacrya and verify that nothing has changed,” I told the others. “If she’s still holed up in the Relictombs, I may be the only person who can get to her—a fact that no doubt played a role in her plan.”

“It seems as if Scythe Seris planned on occupying the Relictombs until you arrived to support her, Regent, but that has been months,” Lyra said warily. “She will have undoubtedly planned for potential delays and tangents, but even she has certainly been pushed to the very end of her resources.”

7

OBSCURED

A CHILD'S scream cut across our conversation, bringing Lyra up short.

We all tensed as I searched for the source of the noise, expecting to rush into defensive action. A moment later, I relaxed, letting out my held breath.

Several children, ranging from perhaps eight to their early teens, were chasing each other between the plots of raised farmland. The girl in the lead was sprinting with a heavy leather ball in her arms while the others struggled to steal it from her.

A boy, slightly larger, caught her arm, and she attempted to throw the ball to another girl. However, it was too heavy and landed several feet short. It rolled into the path of another child, who kicked it wildly by accident, sending it careening in our direction.

"Why are there children here?" Ellie asked, confused.

Lyra watched the children play with a distant expression. "Many Alacryan families had taken up residence in places like Xyrus and Etistin. Mostly those of higher-ranking soldiers. They have nowhere else to go."

The ball rolled to my feet. The children stopped chasing it, keeping their distance as they stared at me nervously. I tossed the ball into the air with my

toe before kicking it back over their heads, sending it sailing. A chorus of laughter broke out among the kids as they took off after it again.

When I turned back around, Lyra was inspecting me intently.

“If you’re going to Alacrya,” she said, “there is something I’d like to ask of you.” A stack of rolled scrolls and folded parchment appeared from her dimension ring. “Some of the people here have written letters to their bloods in Alacrya, but I’ve had no other opportunity to send them.”

Chul snorted. “Are we to be postmen now? Letter carriers for the enemy?”

“Of course we’ll take them,” Caera said, stepping forward to accept the stack of letters from Lyra. She gave me a questioning look.

“It shouldn’t be an issue getting them to Alacrya, at least,” I said noncommittally, feeling more in agreement with Chul than Caera.

Lyra let out a clear, honey-rich laugh, and I couldn’t help but chuckle as well. “I’m not asking you to go door to door and deliver them, Regent. But thank you. Your assistance in this, though it may seem menial to you, is greatly appreciated.”

Caera clutched the letters with care for a long moment before sending them into her dimension ring. “Do we have a destination in mind, then?”

“Is there someplace in Alacrya where we’ll be safe?” Ellie asked in response, fidgeting nervously. Under her breath she added, “I can’t believe I’m going to another *continent*.”

“Yes, I know where to start. Lyra, is there someplace nearby that is out of sight of the village? I’d rather not upset your people by activating a portal to Alacrya right in front of them.”

Lyra agreed before leading us to a small but thriving copse a bit farther away from the village. It was thick enough to shield us from prying eyes.

Withdrawing the tempus warp, I set it on the ground among the yellow grass and activated it, using aether to mold the mana as necessary. The tempus warp glowed, bright in the shadows of the spreading tree limbs, and a portal appeared next to it.

This time, Caera went first. I couldn’t be entirely sure what was waiting on the other side, and I wanted a familiar face to step out of the portal.

The rest followed quickly.

“Thank you, Lyra,” I said, offering the retainer my hand.

She took it. “Things are coming to a head, Regent. I can’t help but feel that Agrona is done biding his time. He does nothing without a plan, and even if his asuran nature sometimes makes him aloof in the moment, I do not believe anything that has happened is outside of his intentions. Even his defeat here in Dicathen.”

“For our sake, I hope you’re wrong,” I said, squeezing her hand firmly one more time before releasing it.

As I reclaimed the tempus warp, I felt my gaze drawn into the middle distance. Beyond the trees, I could still hear children playing and laborers shouting, followed by the low, mournful trumpeting of a moon ox. I thought of soldiers bending the nature of their attack spells to till and water cropland, of organized battlegroups working in concert to build homes instead of destroying them.

I realized that weaker people might have starved out here, or let their situation become so dire they felt no recourse except to attack again, but the Alacryans had thrived.

Who could have guessed that the woman once responsible for spreading Agrona’s vicious lies to this continent would be the same person who now stood beside me, dedicating her life to the betterment of those Agrona saw only as fodder?

Seeing the possibility of better days on the horizon after so long at war, I stepped into the portal.

I was enfolded in trembling light, which took a moment to coalesce into solid shapes as I appeared at my destination. Disembodied voices seeped into my awareness before I could make sense of the shapes. Several different voices, most of them shouting.

As the blurred colors took on meaning, I realized I was facing a wall of defensive spells. Obscured by several shields of wind, fire, ice, and translucent panels of mana was a two-story brick estate, which in turn was surrounded by green hills and golden fields. The portal had deposited us right in the middle of a finely maintained yard, and Chul had his foot in a bed of tangerine-colored bulbs.

He also had his weapon out, and he was scowling at the opposing mages. Regis had jumped in front of him, dissuading Chul from leaping at the Alacryans, while Ellie, holding Silverlight like a quarterstaff, had taken cover behind Boo. Caera had stepped forward with her hands raised over her head and was now calmly attempting to defuse the situation.

“We’re not a threat; just relax. My name is Caera of Highblood Denoir. Please, just—”

One of the shields melted away, and a young woman stepped out through the defensive line. Her orange hair faded to yellow at the tips, framing her disbelieving face and bright hazel eyes. “Professor Grey?”

“Please don’t attack my friends, Briar,” I said, slowly stepping out in front of the others. “That would make this pretty awkward all around.”

One by one, the other shields flickered out, revealing several young mages, all school age. The only one I recognized immediately was Adem, Darrin’s ward. The boy’s dark eyes had gone cartoonishly wide at the sight of me, and his face broke into a huge grin. All around him, the other young mages began to chatter excitedly, looking to Adem for confirmation of what Briar had just said.

The front door of the estate slammed open, and Darrin rushed out into the sunlight, wind already swirling around his fists. At the sight of me, he pulled up short, his expression collapsing into pure shock, then relief, and finally into a grin almost as wide as Adem’s.

“Grey! You incorrigible ass, I nearly soiled myself when the perimeter alarm went off,” he said, getting a round of unsure laughter from the crowd of teenagers. “What in the Vritra’s name are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” I replied, letting my gaze sweep across the estate’s defenders. “Your program has expanded, apparently.”

The grin faltered, and he took a turn inspecting them. “A lot has happened since you left for Central Academy. Why don’t you and your friends come inside? You can tell me what kind of trouble you’ve brought to my door, and I’ll do the same.”

The young mages stepped aside, allowing us to approach the mansion. Sylvie fell into step on my left while Ellie moved to my right. I heard her whisper to Boo to stay in the yard. The guardian bear grumbled but did as she asked. Caera and Regis walked just ahead of me.

Glancing back at Chul, who kept a watchful eye on the Alacryans from the rear, I said, “Thank you for showing restraint.”

He met my eyes for barely a single step, then returned to watching the Alacryan children. “The signal to attack had not been spoken.”

Inside the entrance hall, more young faces were peering out from doorways and down from the banister around the second-floor landing.

“Master Ordin, what—Professor Grey!” Aphene, her dark hair longer than when I’d last seen her at the Victoriad, was blocking off one of the hallways.

Behind her, several much younger children were struggling to hide behind her while simultaneously trying to see what was happening, including the little girl Penka I had met last time I was here.

“Do you have *all* the kids from my class here?” I asked, further caught off guard by Aphene’s presence.

Darrin’s lips curled in a forced smile that didn’t make it to his eyes.

“Marcus is around here somewhere,” Briar said from the doorway behind my group. “His blood was smart enough to get him out of the academy before things really started going to shit.”

“Briar, mouth,” Darrin said, his tone lightly scolding.

I wanted to ask more questions but felt it would be best to do so in private, so I followed Darrin deeper into the estate. A trail of kids followed at a distance, slinking behind us as if we wouldn't notice a dozen pairs of pattering feet. Briar followed more brazenly, acting as if she were one of us and fully intended to join whatever conversation followed our arrival.

Sylvie took in every weapon or piece of art hanging on the wall intently. "Alacrya doesn't seem so different to Dicathen," she mused.

Darrin led us to the same sitting room where he and Alaric had revealed their Central Academy plan to me. My companions and I entered the room, but Darrin stopped Briar at the door.

She crossed her arms and lifted her chin defiantly, but he only had to cock an eyebrow at her. She deflated, flipped her hair in irritation, and shouted at all the other children to get back to their duties, herding them away.

The small, finely appointed chamber was an awkward fit for all of us. Regis, sensing this, became immaterial and vanished into my core. Chul moved to the window and stared out, his back to the rest of us. Caera, still showing the signs of wear from her long ordeal with Vajrakor, eased into a plush chair. Ellie did the same, although she sat much more stiffly, her hands on her knees with Silverlight gleaming across her legs.

Sylvie stayed at my side, her sharp eyes watching Darrin carefully.

It's fine. We can trust him.

'Maybe, but can't you sense how stressed he is? Things haven't been going well for him.'

Arms crossed, I leaned against a bare patch of wall, one of the few not covered by bookshelves or drink cabinets. "So, what's the deal with all the kids?"

Darrin sighed and slumped into a chair. His head slowly panned across the room as he took in each of my companions, and he didn't answer until his eyes met mine. "Civil war, Grey. Some are recently orphaned, others are in hiding to avoid being sent into combat. Your impact can't be understated, either. I'm told that many of your students convinced their bloods not to participate in the war because of you."

“Which is, in a way, why we’re here,” Caera interjected, drawing Darrin’s attention.

“Lady Caera, it’s a pleasure to see you again,” Darrin said, his gaze lingering on her horns.

In a motion that seemed unintentional, Caera’s hand drifted up to her horns, almost as if she’d forgotten they were visible. “Some of us have been fighting this civil war for a long time. Like Scythe Seris. We’re seeking word of her. Is there anything you can tell us?”

Darrin’s jaw clenched, then relaxed. Standing suddenly, he went to a low shelf containing bottles and glasses and poured himself a drink, then drained it in a single quick gulp. “Half of these kids’ parents are trapped in the Relictombs with her. Forces under Scythe Dragoth Vritra have been assaulting the portals to the second level nonstop for weeks.

“Alaric has a couple people embedded with those soldiers feeding us intel, although it’s hardly necessary. The first-level industry hasn’t slowed at all, even with the ascents basically shut down. All I know is that the assault forces are growing more confident each day that they’re going to breach the second level soon.”

Caera glanced at me, her urgency apparent. “We shouldn’t wait then, Grey—sorry, Arthur. We need to go immediately.”

Darrin’s brows shot up as she said my name. “So, it’s true then. You’re Dicathian, like the rumors say?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Ellie asked defensively, clutching Silverlight as she looked nervously at Darrin.

Darrin responded to Ellie’s discomfort with a warm smile. “Nothing, really, I just…I’m sorry, Grey—Arthur—hasn’t introduced us. I’m Darrin, ex-ascender and current wrangler of terrified children. I’ve helped him out of more than one precarious predicament, and I’m hoping he’s here to return the favor.”

“Oh,” Ellie said, looking sheepishly down at her knees.

Sparing him too many details, I quickly introduced everyone other than Caera, with whom he was already acquainted.

“It does sound like we need to leave immediately, but…there is a problem with this next part,” I admitted, pushing away from the wall and meeting my bond’s eye.

“I can’t go into the Relictombs,” she said with a pinched frown.

“I’ll stay with Sylvie, if that’s what you want,” Ellie volunteered, surprising me.

“I don’t want to leave anyone behind, but we don’t have a choice. It’ll be fastest if Caera, Regis, and I go alone.” To Darrin, I asked, “Can the others stay here? Sylvie and Chul should be of great help in keeping your wards occupied.”

Chul turned away from the window, glowering. “I did not trade one hiding place for another.”

I began to respond when something caught my attention. Realmheart bathed my vision in a sea of colors, allowing me to see the wind-attribute spell with sound deviancy altering the protection cast on the door.

Darrin—noticing my gaze—strode quickly to the door and swung it open. A handful of the older students spilled to the ground. Behind them, Aphene and Briar had the decency to at least look sheepish.

“Really now,” Darrin chided, shaking his head. “What are you, a bunch of wild animals?”

“My parents are in the Relictombs,” one young man said from his knees. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“Professor Grey will need help if he’s going to assist Scythe Seris Vritra.” Bold as always, Briar didn’t flinch under the combined gaze of my entire group. “We can *fight*—”

“Which is exactly what you were sent here *not* to do, correct?” Darrin said softly. I saw then just how much he cared for his many wards, as his kindness only grew in the face of Briar’s defiance.

“If you want to help,” Caera interjected, standing and approaching the children as they picked themselves up off the floor, “perhaps you can find the recipients of these letters.” She removed the stack of scrolls and parchment from Lyra and handed them to Briar. “But be careful. You don’t want these to be tracked back to you or Darrin.”

Aphene plucked one of the scrolls from Briar’s arms and inspected the tag. “I don’t know this blood, but…” Turning to Caera, she bowed deeply. “We will do our best, Lady Denoir!”

Darrin looked on nervously, but he didn’t countermand Caera. “Now go on, all of you.”

With the door closed and protected once again, our conversation continued for some time. Darrin was more than willing to allow my companions to stay with him, although they themselves were less enthusiastic about being left behind, especially Chul.

In the end, though, it was the Relictombs that set our course.

Withdrawing the Compass, I dislocated the two halves and activated the ascension portal. As I’d seen it do many times, the crystal within disintegrated and formed an opaque portal above the half-sphere. I knew immediately that something was wrong.

The portal itself was distorted, the light spilling out from it bending unnaturally. I stepped quickly aside to avoid touching the clutching rays of viscous light, only then catching sight of my bond.

Sylvie was staring at the portal as if in a trance, and it almost seemed as if the portal itself was reaching toward her.

“You okay?” I asked, my fingers twitching with the desire to cancel out the portal.

Sylvie nodded, her hand coming up slowly as she reached toward the light that was simultaneously reaching for her. “I’m fine, it’s just…there’s some kind resonance between me and the portal…”

Faint striations were rippling through the atmospheric aether, I realized, connecting Sylvie and the ascension portal.

“Sylvie,” I warned, a vague, disembodied panic tightening my chest.

She hesitated, looking to me as if asking for permission. “It feels… comfortable.”

My fists clenched at my sides as I resisted the urge to hold her back. I tried to consider the situation rationally, but I had no basis for making a decision. The portal should simply push her back, like what had happened with Taci and Aldir, but Sylvie could be different. Alternatively, the Compass could work differently, but I had no way of knowing if that was a good or bad thing.

All I could do in the end was trust her, and so I nodded. Her fingertips brushed the edges of the opaque oval, and she stepped through, vanishing into the Relictombs.

‘Well shit,’ Regis thought, leaping through the portal after her.

“Change of plans,” I snapped. “Chul, go with her.”

He grinned, conjured his weapon, and leapt in. Caera set her jaw in determination and followed.

Ellie was watching me carefully, clearly still unsure if she was coming with us or not. I nodded and waved her toward the portal. There was a faint *pop* and Boo appeared next to her, his bulk overturning an end table. “Oops, sorry,” Ellie said before striding into the portal, followed closely by her bond.

“No one else will be able to enter the portal after I go through,” I explained to Darrin, “but don’t let anyone tamper with the artifact.”

“It’ll be locked in this room. No one will enter, I can promise you that,” Darrin assured me as he righted the overturned table. “Do you have any idea what you’re getting yourself into?”

“Nothing pleasant, I’m sure.” Not wishing to leave my companions inside the Relictombs without me for any longer than I already had, I strode through the portal.

And stepped into…something indescribable.

Furious violet pressure locked my body in place. An invisible storm raged, and my pulse seemed to start and stop again, my heart beating rapidly and then not at all. I couldn't see, hear, or think clearly. I wasn't even sure if I'd arrived in the Relictombs.

'It's Sylvie…' Regis's voice came to me through the crush of aether, distorted and halting.

Along with his voice came the flash of a memory: Regis, appearing on the other side of the portal. Sylvie, her body stiff and falling like she was having some kind of seizure. Moving a half step toward her. Then, an explosion of aether, compressing Regis into little more than a wisp trapped inside viscous aetheric tar.

Activating Realmheart, I sensed for the others. They were there, immobile, frozen, but otherwise they didn't appear to be harmed in any way. *For now.*

Gathering as much of my own power as I could, I pushed outward, attempting to force my way through the obstruction while carefully maneuvering between my companions. Bit by bit, the opposing aether gave way, and I was able to inch forward. One step, then another, deeper into the morass, until…

My right foot bumped into the source of the chaos.

Bending down—slowly, as I had to be careful now to push out only enough aether to keep from being locked in place again—I reached for Sylvie.

The air between us cleared, the amethyst fog pushed aside by my countering force.

Sylvie was on the ground, her eyes open but rolled so far back in her head that only the whites showed. Her body was rigid and motionless. Grabbing her shoulders, I shook her gently. When she didn't respond, I shook harder.

She didn't react.

"Sylvie!"

Sylv, can you hear me?

She didn't reply.

My mind raced. I couldn’t be certain if the aether was being controlled by her in some kind of spell or emanation, or if the Relictombs itself was generating the phenomenon. She was unconscious, but the aether *felt* like her, neither of which made sense. *A defensive mechanism, maybe?* I wondered. *Triggered by some reaction from the Relictombs?*

Attempting to expel the aetheric storm was too dangerous. I might rip Ellie or Caera to pieces in between the opposing forces. I could try to cancel it, but without understanding what was happening or why, I was afraid to inhibit Sylvie in any way.

Still, I knew I had to do something.

Expanding my senses, which required a forceful effort on my part as I exuded my own aether to push outward through the spell’s effect like worms burrowing through soil, I tried to find the edges of the cloud.

My pulse quickened at what I discovered.

The storm was expanding outward, building on itself with the atmospheric aether of the zone. Sylvie didn’t have an aether core and so had no purified aether of her own to utilize. Like all dragons, she could only influence the aether around her. If I could force the aether back inward, containing it somehow, I could prevent her spell from affecting the rest of us without cutting her off from it.

I saw the problem with this almost immediately.

If I was spending all my energy containing Sylvie’s unconscious spell, I wouldn’t be able to help the others clear the zone. But Sylvie had no natural way to contain so much aether, no ability to draw in and store the aether like I did.

Except I *did* have a way to manipulate aether outside of my body without constant conscious input.

Reaching for the tether to my relic armor, I tried to manifest it without conjuring it onto my body. The black scales appeared over my skin. I ground my teeth and attempted to physically remove it, but unlike normal armor, there was no way to do so.

‘Maybe I could help, if I could move,’ Regis thought.

If we could just…yeah, that might work. Let me see what I can do.

Kneeling next to Sylvie, I opened the floodgates of my core. I didn’t attempt to control the aether that began pouring out of me, simply let it expand out into the atmosphere. It spread through the cloud, doing nothing to disrupt the spell but blending in with the atmospheric aether forming the emanation.

I could feel the expanding edge of the cloud and the density of the atmospheric aether, and I tried to match my output to how much the spell was influencing. It took a minute. When I thought the two forces were nearly in balance, I took control.

Each purple particle of my purified aether latched onto a particle of what made up Sylvie’s spell. I couldn’t hope to individually control each mote, but the aether responded to my intention and reacted appropriately.

Finding Regis within the storm, I stilled the aether around him, then opened a sort of tunnel between us. He was with me instantly, flying out of the cloud and into my core.

‘What even is she doing*?’* he groused, mentally shaking off the effects of the spell.

No time. After.

The basis of our idea was the same concept Regis and I had utilized when I imbued a conjured sword with Destruction by channeling our combined power into my aether. First, Regis flowed into the armor itself, maintaining his incorporeal state. Then I released the armor. Regis stayed with it, allowing himself to be pulled between aetheric states.

The armor faded, becoming incorporeal as well, but did not entirely vanish. However the djinn had crafted the relic, they had never accounted for it bringing along another aetheric form, and so it froze between states.

When Regis flew toward Sylvie, the shadowy armor was dragged with him. He disappeared into Sylvie, and I tugged at the thread between me and the armor, making it physical again. Or, rather, trying to.

Instead, the shadowy essence of the half-summoned armor tore like a silk shirt. Cursing, I reached out with my aether and attempted to grab onto the armor, similar to how I manipulated mana with aether. Regis pulled at it, trying to draw the armor around Sylvie while I held it together.

Closing my eyes, I made one thought clear in my mind. *Protect her*.

I let all other thoughts slip away, focusing entirely on the armor and that simple idea.

Time seemed frozen.

In a jittery, sped up fashion, the armor started to coalesce, shrinking to fit Sylvie's body while hardening into its corporeal state around her. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

My mind went back to the aether I'd released into the atmosphere, each particle bonded with those of Sylvie's spell.

The atmospheric aether fought me, attempting to maintain the shape Sylvie's will was influencing it into. But as the djinn projection had explained, my core gave me the advantage of much tighter control and a much stronger bond with the purified aether. I overpowered Sylvie's influence.

The spell was forced inward toward Sylvie herself. I could feel the edges of the storm shrinking as the obscuring purple haze faded from the air. Bit by bit, it was all contained within Sylvie using the relic armor as the shell.

A bloodcurdling battle cry exploded just beside me as Chul reared back, his weapon held at the ready as his head jerked this way and that in search of an enemy.

Someone else heaved, and I turned just in time to see my sister be sick on the ground not far from where Sylvie lay. Caera wrapped an arm around her and pulled Ellie's hair out of her face, muttering something soft and consoling.

'Hah, it worked. I didn't expect that,' Regis thought as he drifted free of Sylvie's body. He solidified into his physical form and shook the mane of fire burning around his neck.

I cupped Sylvie's face in my hand and used Realmheart to search for any signs of injury, backlash, or magical damage, but she seemed physically unharmed. Now that the spell had been contained, it was clear that this effect was being projected by Sylvie herself and wasn't an attack by the Relictombs.

"The armor is doing most of the work, but I'm going to have to stay focused on it to keep her spell from breaking free again," I explained to the others.

"Pah, what here could threaten me?" Chul asked, staring around confidently.

My gaze followed his, fully taking in our surroundings for the first time.

We had been deposited on a narrow patch of flat, barren ground in the middle of a forest. Except for where we stood, the trees grew up out of calm, clear water. Giant roots occasionally rose above the surface like winding highways, mirroring the limbs above.

There was no sky, only the constantly climbing flora, branches as wide as highways weaving together to create the impression that there was no beginning or end to the forest canopy. Despite the lack of sun or sky, the forest was lit with cool, sourceless light.

"Is—is Sylvie okay," Ellie asked weakly, struggling to stand straight as she wiped her mouth clean. Boo moaned and nudged her with his broad forehead. "Why does she look like that?"

Sylvie was still rigid, her eyes rolled back into her head. I tried shaking her again, then lifted her up into a sitting position. Her muscles were so taut it was difficult to move her. "Hey, Sylv…Sylvie?"

When there was no response, I closed my eyes and projected my voice directly into her mind. *Sylvie, can you hear me?*

My constant connection with her mind was absent. My thoughts reached nothing.

The others weren't silently waiting for me to give orders. Caera had already activated the artifact bracer she'd claimed from the Spear Beaks' treasure.

Multiple silver spikes flew outward, some going up into the limbs above, others skirting the top of the water.

Chul had leapt from the ground to a nearby root that stuck up fifteen feet above the water's surface. With one hand on a tree the size of an old Earth skyscraper, he searched our surroundings.

"We need to move, to reach the exit portal," I said, lifting Sylvie and laying her carefully across Boo's broad back. "Maybe this state is only temporary, or maybe we need to get her out of the Relictombs, I don't know. Either way, I don't want to linger here any longer than necessary."

Ellie jumped up behind Sylvie to hold her in place. She gave me a fierce look. "We've got her, Arthur."

"Grey," Caera said softly, her eyes flickering open and closed rapidly as she focused on whatever input was coming from her drones. "We're not alone."

8

SCALES OF UNDERSTANDING

SYLVIE INDRATH

The Compass portal wrapped around me, embracing me and pulling me in. The transition was seamless, unlike the ancient portals dotted around Dicathen. On the other side, I found myself in a picturesque world that seemed more likely to be found in Epheotus than in Dicathen or Alacrya. Towering trees, their tops not visible from the forest floor, grew up from an expansive, crystal-clear lake. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. Like a picture.

Like coming home.

Even as I acknowledged the strangeness of this thought, I was already losing focus on the scenery. A purple haze fell over my eyes, like a curtain lowering. My body felt stiff, distant, and outside of my control.

I sagged, then jerked upright.

The forest was gone. Above me, the aetheric void stretched into infinity in every direction. My feet rested not on solid ground but smooth water, opaque with the reflection of the purple sky.

The moment I acknowledged the water, I descended into it. There was no splash, only cool pressure enveloping me from the feet up. I tried to swim,

to claw my way back to the surface, but my limbs slid through the water without creating the upward force necessary to propel me. My eyes burned, my lungs ached, and panic threatened to overwhelm me.

The water, solid as ink, parted. A hand reached down for me, but it wasn't made of flesh and blood. It felt more like aetheric wind molded into the approximation of an arm and hand.

It didn't matter. I took it.

My skin prickled as if I'd grabbed a charged mana crystal where the aetheric limb touched me, then I was rising, pulling free of the water, and was back out under the void sky.

A violent fit of coughing racked my body, and I struggled to wipe the viscous liquid from my eyes.

"Breathe. Calm your heart. Take control."

Blinking rapidly, I tried to look at the figure before me, whose hand I was still holding—or rather, whose hand was still holding me up. My toes sank into the water, and without their hand I would have plunged down once again.

"This power will swallow you whole if you let it. *Take control*."

The speaker was…a dragon, but—no, she was humanoid, slightly taller than me, horns of deep purple wind thrusting up from amethyst hair—and yet, at the same time, she seemed to be a huge, demonic creature staring down at me. All three at once, perhaps, or changing from one to the next in rapid succession, unless it was a trick of the swirling winds that formed her frame, or—

I shook my head and sank slightly deeper into the water as her grip on me slackened. "I don't understand, I—" A distant, time-blurred memory surfaced. "Sylvia? M-Mom?"

The wind-carved lips twisted up, indistinct. "Your identity is forged of contradictions. Both dragon and basilisk, an asura bonded to a human, twice born and twice adapted to the power that is aether. You are order from chaos, but the nature of this universe is entropy. These contradictions—

these paradoxes—will always try to pull you apart. Father and grandfather, dragons and humans…vivum and aevum."

I listened the same way a child listens to a conversation between adults: I heard the words but could make little to no sense of them.

"Who are you?" I asked again, and my feet sank deeper still, the glass-smooth water caressing my ankles.

"*I* am not here. But *you* are. And you will not leave if you continue to focus on all the wrong things. You and you alone can keep yourself from sinking forever."

I closed my eyes, but the aetheric realm, the endless expanse of water, and the figure were still clearly visible before me. "I'm sorry. What do I need to do?"

"First, you must stand on your own."

"I can't walk on water," I protested, peeking down at the water around my ankles.

"There is no water."

I wanted to argue, to point at the liquid overtaking me and let out some sarcastic retort. But I held back, remembering what else the figure had said. *Breathe. Take control.*

I did, or at least I tried. I was hardly in a comfortable enough position to search for mindfulness, but I started with my breath. When I gained control of that, I moved outward, taking hold over one muscle, one limb at a time. Finally, I pulled myself up so my feet were out of the water.

Considering what she had said, I approached the most obvious solution first. "If what I'm seeing isn't real, then…I'm in my own mind, aren't I?"

When I'd been in the aetheric realm with Arthur, the only interruption of the empty aetheric space was a single Relictombs zone as seen from the outside. This place was similar, but not the same.

My breath steadied. My feet felt sturdier. I lowered them until the soles rested against the cool water. *Be stable*, I thought.

My flesh pressed against the glassy surface. It held.

I was standing atop the water like I had been when I first appeared here, in that single moment before I recognized the floor for what it was. My perception of the floor had caused it to change, taking on the characteristics I expected from it. *Like how mana reacts to both my purposeful intention and my expectation of it simultaneously*.

“You have many questions. This is your conversation to lead. Ask them. Understanding is how you’ll take control. Time is of the essence.”

Time, I thought, the word triggering a deeper memory, something half lost and only partially found. *Even time bends before Fate*.

“You…it was your voice I heard in the void. What did you mean?” I asked.

“Time is an arrow.”

Lines formed in the air all around, wind made visible, drawing a bombardment of arrows that fired past us, all moving in the same direction. I stared, unable to make sense of the figure’s words, but the longer I looked, the more I noticed about the arrows. Some moved slightly slower or faster, and others weren’t straight at all. They curved, weaving in and out of the paths of other arrows.

“My innate capacity to influence aether in the path of vivum has regressed,” I said, voicing an uncomfortable thought that had been growing in me since my return. “You’re saying that…my aptitude has shifted toward aevum instead? According to what I was taught, this isn’t possible.”

“Many things are thought impossible until they become real. Fools insist reality must conform to their expectations, while the wise know that knowledge of our reality is constantly evolving, timeless and without finality.”

The arrows arced sharply downward and began to fall as raindrops, and where the rain landed, it revealed the outline of a building. Lacking color, contrast, or detail, it took me a moment to recognize the shape of Dicathen’s flying castle over the dense canopy of the Beast Glades. Aetherial clouds drifted overhead, wind-blown and dark. The water below reflected the rain-drawn outlines above.

Of all the places I had lived—Zestier, Xyrus, Mount Geolus—the flying castle held the strongest memories for me. I had enjoyed being close to the Beast Glades, where I had hunted for years while Arthur adventured. There was a magic to the place, something unexplainable and ancient, and I had enjoyed that too.

But mostly, it was where I grew into myself.

My eyes refocused as the indistinct figure, now a towering being with huge horns, faded in and out, the aetheric wind dispersing in chaotic gusts.

“Time is also limited, the most finite of resources. As your mind wanders farther away from here, the sands run faster. You are still in danger.”

“What danger?” I asked. “What is this place? Did you bring me here?”

“Entropy.”

“Is that the answer to one question or all three?” I asked quickly, trying to force myself to be present, to hold one thought in my mind at a time.

But the castle was slowly being destroyed in the background, and my heart sank to think of it. Zestier demolished, only dust and ash, Xyrus taken by the Alacryans, and the flying castle destroyed by Cadell.

My mother’s murderer, I thought bitterly.

The figure faded further, the winds growing even more wild.

“I’m sorry,” I breathed, clenching my eyes shut and focusing on the image. In my mind, she was a beautiful white dragon with lavender eyes. When I peeked through half-closed lids, the figure was stable again. “What are you here to tell me?”

“What do you need to know?”

I shook my head. The question was too open-ended, too broad. I hadn’t been back long enough, didn’t fully understand what was needed. Only…

“What is Fate?” I asked, holding my breath.

The voice spoke. The noise of her words entered my ears. I blinked several times, my head lolling helplessly as I stared at the figure. It was just that—

noise—but absent meaning or understanding.

I shook my head again. “I…I don’t…” I trailed off, struggling even to form a coherent thought as the meaningless buzzing of the figure’s explanation still wriggled through my brain.

“Unlike the djinn, you can’t construct a castle in the air. Lacking the foundation to build such insight upon, there is no hope for you to understand it.”

I dragged in a long, conflicted breath. The air smelled of smoldering citrus and tasted of ozone. By now, the flying castle, shown only by where the dots of aetheric rain splashed against it, was nothing but a crumbled ruin of orbiting bricks and broken stone.

One thing was starting to make sense to me, at least. “This conversation… I’m molding it, aren’t I? You can’t volunteer information. You aren’t here to tell me something specific. I have to ask you the right questions.”

“In a way, though perhaps there are no specific ‘right questions,’ only those that bring you closer to insight or push you farther from it.”

“Why did my innate capacity toward vivum change?” I asked, deciding on a path forward.

The figure was humanoid now, her wind-drawn body thin and graceful, the features of her face sharp but the details indistinct. “Only one who has progressed far down the path of aevum in their aetheric knowledge can be in two places at once, separating body and spirit to pursue knowledge outside the trail of their own time’s arrow. To travel as you have, and return, left this insight’s mark on your spirit like a long journey builds calluses on your heels.”

“And when my body reformed, my spirit’s connection to aevum was stronger than my body’s to vivum,” I said, picking up where the figure left off. I thought I understood, but that understanding was tenuous, hovering at the edge of my consciousness. “But…I don’t *feel* like I have any insight into aevum. My ability to heal…”

The downpour of aetheric rain receded, blown away by visible striations of gusting wind. The swirling lines of wind straightened and became the

outlines of sharp spikes protruding from the darkness. Amethyst rivulets trickled down the spikes and dripped from their sharp points into the cool, glassy water. It was blood, though I wasn't exactly certain how I knew.

I began to move, walking through the field of spikes as if in a dream, afraid who I might find pinned beneath them: Alea Triscan, Cynthia Goodsky, Alduin and Merial Eralith, Arthur…

The figure walked beside me in the form of a huge dragon, each step sending out a ripple across the water's surface. "You remember the many painful lessons of your life, but what you experienced on your spiritual journey was something very different. That insight is woven into the fabric of your being, not burned into your soft tissue by a specific sequence of firing neurons. And yet, it is still there."

The spikes, pulsing with each gust of the aetheric wind that formed them, seemed to grow closer and closer no matter where my feet took me, even when I stopped entirely. Soon, they were nearly pressing into my skin.

"Agrona and Kezess. They seek this insight, don't they?" As I spoke, a spike pressed against my throat. "Why was I able to gain what other asuras have tried and failed to for so long?"

"Fear."

I looked at the spikes all around me but did not feel afraid.

"Not your fear. *Theirs*. Fear has long rooted them in place. Kezess has made himself and his people unchangeable for fear of what change might bring, terror of the beyond. Agrona, in his fear, seeks to change himself at the expense of all others, to burn worlds as fuel for his own ascension. Both are incapable of risk and self-sacrifice, and so they are incapable of gaining new insight."

I took a step forward, and the spike at my throat receded. Wherever I walked, the spikes unfolded away from me. "But they are the two most powerful beings in this world. What are they both so afraid of? Each other?"

The figure unraveled at the edges. "Focus. That is a story for another time, and unrelated to what you need to accomplish in this moment."

I did as the figure commanded, preparing myself to ask a question I already knew the answer to. “If I’m at risk of unraveling because of all these opposing forces that make me up, then that insight will be lost, right?”

“Not just you. Never just you. You are bonded. Three parts of one whole. Spatium. Vivum. Aevum.”

“Aether,” I breathed. “Arthur…and Regis. And me.”

The dragon nodded its long, graceful neck. With each step she was passing through spikes that came undone, dissolving into wind and drifting away.

I stopped walking through the field of spikes, and the spikes melted like ice. “And this is important—no, necessary. For the…understanding of Fate?”

The figure’s indistinct humanoid face displayed a warm smile. I realized we were each standing in a small pool of water now. The aetheric wind was forming something between and around us, long arms above and bowls below, containing the water. A central beam between, and—

“A scale,” I muttered, staring at the fulcrum.

The figure was a huge dragon again. The scale was much lower on her side than mine

“Only one who has mastered the paths of aevum, vivum, and spatium can begin to understand the fourth edict of Fate. But no single being can walk three paths at once.”

“But if three were as one…” Mentally, I charted the path of our conversation so far, and my mind stuck on one point. “It comes back to entropy, doesn’t it?”

“The nature of all things. Time’s arrow. Movement from order to disorder, form to formlessness. The dissolution of structure.”

“You’re suggesting there is a danger of Arthur, Regis, and I separating,” I thought out loud, staring into the figure’s empty wind-drawn eyes. “But… not all things are divided by entropy. Isn’t it also the process by which things combine and settle, becoming more homogenous?”

“Note that the scales of your understanding have not shifted. Think deeper, farther.”

I struggled to see where this could be going or why it was important enough for me to be speaking with an ephemeral, nameless figure in my mind that may or may not be the disembodied spirit of my mother communicating to me through the aetheric realm. Still, I tried.

“You’re saying that I have to hold myself together against these opposing forces, the ones threatening to pull me to pieces. But…I also have to hold *us* together. Regis is chaos, the living embodiment of entropy—Destruction manifest. And Arthur is”—I smiled, feeling my eyes wrinkle at the corners—“still so very *human*. He’s already proven once that he’ll rip himself to pieces, cell by cell, to defeat his enemies, burn himself up from the inside if he has to. His sense of self-preservation is…lacking.”

The scale shifted slightly closer to equilibrium, though the humanoid figure was still looking up at me from several feet down.

“So, I’m aevum-aligned now,” I said, feeling understanding coming a little more easily. “Time may be an arrow, but I can slow its flight, bend it even. To ensure that we remain together long enough to finish this.”

Even as I said these words, they conjured in my mind a time *after*, when we *weren’t* together, and my concentration snapped like a frayed rope.

The scales dissolved, and once again, the figure and I were standing atop the water. My feet sank slightly, just breaking the surface, and the aetheric winds swirled into meaningless chaos, an artist’s rendition of discord and disarray drawn in violet lines against the deep purple sky. The breath caught in my lungs, and each quickened heartbeat pulsed through the water and sky, the aetheric wind, and even the giant demonic figure watching me with what I thought was sympathy.

“You aren’t ready yet. To lose concentration now would be…catastrophic.”

The harder I tried to hold onto my focus, the more violently it seemed to resist me.

“What is too rigid will break under force. That which is too pliable and allows too much freedom of movement can be torn or peeled away. Control.

Balance. That is what you are, and what you must find."

I clenched my teeth and shut my eyes, frustrated that it failed to block out the vision. A moment to adjust, to recover, that was all I asked, all I…

I swallowed heavily. "All things come to an end," I said, barely a whisper. "But if we—as we master aevum, vivum, and spatium…as we seek insight into the edict of Fate, *we* get to control when the end is." My breathing calmed again. I opened my eyes and stared into the figure's indistinct face. "And for every end, there are new beginnings too. Endings don't have to be something to fear."

Jagged lines straightened and the formless mass began to take shape. It was a deeply comfortable place, one that made me want to curl up in a ball and take a long nap atop my bond's head: Arthur and Elijah's bedroom within the Helstea estate.

On all fours, I hopped up on the bed, walked in a circle around Arthur's pillow, and then curled up atop it. The woman rested gracefully at the foot of the bed, watching me.

"The aetheric realm—it's how things end, isn't it?" I mused sleepily. "As pure energy when everything else has come apart, the universe separated down to its base. That's why aether is so potent for the creation of things—but also why the Relictombs is degrading. It is against the nature of that place to maintain form and function."

She nodded, her eyes leaving me and traveling around the blurry recreation of Arthur's room.

"But it remembers what it was. The aether. That's why we can create spellforms. Even the godrunes. They're an expression of that held memory, insight made manifest. Knowledge of the spellforms is housed in djinn-crafted implements, but the godrunes…"

I had to stop, to really think. It was getting so hard. I just wanted to rest, to sleep.

"The aetheric realm. All the knowledge of any form aether has ever taken. Like…a sleeping god. As Arthur's understanding of specific edicts grows, the aether remembers and forms a godrune. But this only happens for him.

Because of his connection with the aether. The djinn remnant said he was unique, that the aether saw him as kin, in a way.”

Again, a simple nod.

Outside Arthur’s window, a horned owl flew past.

“But if I’m in danger right now, understanding this isn’t helping me.”

I paused, looking more closely at the figure. She was a giant demoness again, but still resting gracefully on the foot of the bed, her broad, frightening visage silent and watchful. But she was unraveling at the edges, and it had been some time since she’d spoken. I had grown distracted. Whatever connection was holding our minds together was coming undone.

Standing suddenly, I physically shook off the sense of comfort I felt. Comfort meant complacence, and complacence was the death of growth. She’d said it before: insight required risk. But more than that, growth required pain.

The bed dissolved into individual threads of wind, and I landed on all fours on the water’s surface. Wind-drawn walls, windows, and furniture alike unfolded and billowed away. I stood, returning to my own humanoid form. The demoness became a dragon again, each scale gusting and distorted.

The bright lines of aetheric wind carved themselves into the rough stone walls of a ravine. The water beneath me began to pop and bubble as it glowed with a bright, violently violet light.

In a slow, controlled motion, I began sinking into the floor. The sensation was purely mental anguish, and it woke me from my drowsing completely, setting my mind alight at a cellular level.

I let out a hissing, pain-filled breath, imagining the water-turned-lava boiling the insight from my bones and releasing it into the atmosphere where I could see it manifest in the scenery around me.

The dragon watched from above, her long neck craning down from atop the ravine walls, her expression unreadable.

“I have to understand my new power or I’ll die,” I said, reciting the problem as if reading it from a book. “If I die, Arthur will fail to gain insight into the edict of Fate.” I let myself sink lower, the aetheric lava now all the way up to my neck. “Time. Time is an arrow. But through the path of aevum, I can influence that arrow. Bend it to avoid or strike a target at will. The insight I gained while experiencing Arthur’s past life is written on my spirit.”

I slipped entirely beneath the surface. The pain wiped every thought and impulse from my mind except for one immediate idea: the reclamation of that subconscious understanding of aevum and aether’s impact on time. I had to reconnect my body and spirit, make sense of all the many aspects of myself that were contradictory in nature.

I understand that I am both dragon and basilisk, the result of the lines of Indrath and Vritra. This is my lineage, but it is not my identity. I choose to be something beyond either of them. I choose to be unafraid.

I appreciate that I am an asura—a so-called greater being—bonded to a human, a “lesser.” Arthur is the third choice, the last hope, humanity’s ascension. There is no shame in my service to him, because through it the very idea of greater and lesser beings will be made meaningless.

I accept that I am order from chaos, spontaneous rebirth, the bond that holds against the inevitable. I am what the rest of my kind are not: changeable. I had my time, and I gave everything I was, and now my time has come again.

I am guardian and guide, caution and fury, daughter and partner.

But I am not my mother’s mistake or my father’s tool. I am not my grandfather’s treasure to be hoarded or weapon to be swung.

I reject the role required of my birth clans, and I refuse the name of Indrath or Vritra.

SYLVIE LEYWIN

I burst up from the aetheric lava, pressing against its bubbling surface as I dragged myself onto my hands and knees, and then stood trembling to my feet.

The ravine walls were collapsing, wind spinning like stones that bounced from one another then fluttered away as birds and butterflies.

The ground was mirror smooth again. The wind calmed, then vanished entirely. I was standing alone atop the infinite expanse of water under an endless aetheric sky. The figure was nowhere to be seen, though I thought I could still sense her, feel her like breath on the back of my neck.

My reflection was looking up at me from the floor, this taller, leaner frame I had returned within, my face sharper, older, like Arthur's, our hair and eyes almost making us look like twins. I leaned down, peering more closely. There was more of Arthur in my reflection than I had remembered, almost as if…

I gasped, sinking down onto my hands, staring.

Within my reflection, Arthur was staring back at me. Kind but serious, urgent but patient. He was speaking slowly, calmly, calling to me. I couldn't hear his words, but I could understand his meaning. They needed me. *He* needed me.

The water-floor bulged upward. Arthur's hands, his voice, his presence were pushing through into the mental world I'd become trapped within.

I let my hands sink through the water and interlaced my fingers with his.

9

A BROKEN PATH

ARTHUR LEYWIN

A dark shape passed between the enormous limbs of the endlessly climbing trees. The movement was too fast and the cover too dense for me to make out any details. Even with Realmheart active, I could sense neither mana nor aether from the shadow in the brief moment I was able to see it.

“What was that?” Ellie asked, her voice high-pitched with nervous tension.

“We need to get moving,” I said, searching our surroundings for any hint of the passing shadow or the way forward.

The roots snaked through the water like winding paths, most wide enough to support a beast-drawn carriage. The water through which they grew was so clear that it disguised its depth, creating an optical illusion that made the mossy stones of the lake floor seem only inches below the surface.

“Up or down?” Caera asked, her eyes unfocused as she utilized whatever senses her drones provided instead of her own. “The branches are wide enough to navigate easily, even for your bear, and more densely woven together than the roots.”

I glanced at Sylvie, who was lying stiffly across Boo’s back shrouded in my armor. Ellie had one hand on her protectively. “That’s risky. If we’re

attacked, any of us could be knocked off one of those branches."

"Hey Chulio, as half a phoenix, what happens when you transform? Do you, like, only get one wing? Or do you just get the beak and tail?" Regis asked teasingly.

"I get no such sproutings from my buttocks. I can transform fully, but…it's difficult to maintain such a form," Chul admitted, apparently heedless of Regis's quip.

Ellie conjured a band of mana that wrapped around Boo and Sylvie, holding my bond down. When that was done, three orbs of bright mana appeared and silently circled her right hand. The sweat beading her brow and the tight grimace across her face said everything I was already thinking: with both Chul and Sylvie present, this zone would be harder than anything we had faced on our last ascent.

"Chul, lead the way." I indicated a nearby root that we could easily climb on to cross the water. "The roots are thicker in that direction."

Chul marched to the edge of the small island and jumped casually onto the root, the top of which protruded six feet out of the water. He landed with unexpected grace for one of his size, looked around, and then extended his hand down to help the next person up.

Just as Caera reached for his hand, a dark blur streaked from the shadows, and Chul vanished within it.

Caera leapt back, narrowly avoiding a pair of long tails that scythed behind the speeding beast.

In the blink of an eye, the blurred shape had wheeled away from us, skirting the top of the water before pulling upward and rising into the web of oversized limbs above.

I channeled aether into God Step, and the aetheric pathways lit up before my eyes. The paths spread out from me like violet lightning, connecting each point to every other, but only for fifteen feet. There, the pathways simply cut off, those directly around me severed from the paths everywhere else. Both sets seemed constantly in flux as they shifted and distorted but never reconnected.

A surge of energy from Sylvie was enough to explain exactly what was happening.

Black bolts of fire cut across the shadowy forest as I released the godrune. Caera's shots missed, trailing after what I could now tell was a diamond-shaped creature with dusky flesh. It had two long whiplike tails, each with a nasty barb growing from the end. Despite its enormous bulk—its wingspan was as wide as Sylvie's in her dragon form—it swam through the air with a greater speed than any fish in water.

"There's something on its back," Ellie said urgently, her sharp eyes picking up details the rest of us couldn't make out. "I think it's slowing down."

An amused scoff rang in my mind. *'Looks like spicy chicken doesn't agree with the demonic manta ray.'*

Imbuing my vision with aether, I could just make out a glossy red patch against its black hide. As I watched, the creature began to glow from within, its flight becoming erratic as the winglike protrusions wobbled. The indistinct red shape separated, vanishing into the water as the glow grew rapidly brighter. Flesh split, and orange flames leapt out of the resulting fissures.

A sharp screech suddenly erupted from the beast, causing my vision to spin as the vibration drove knives into my brain. In the distance, one of the beast's wings clipped a tree, ripping the limb free of the body with a horrible wet tearing sound. The vibration intensified, then cut out entirely as the beast crashed into the lake, disappearing beneath the churning waters.

Shaking off the aftereffects of the vibrations, I jumped up onto the root where Chul had been attacked. I paused, searching the forest for any sign of danger before attempting to make out the aetheric pathways again.

I was just beyond the edge of the effect I'd seen, where the paths broke. The island we'd appeared on was still disconnected from everywhere else, but I could now sense my way to where Chul had crashed, and I wasted no more time before stepping into them. Appearing several hundred feet away atop the root closest to where the lifeless body of the creature was submerged, I was immediately inundated with hot steam as a cascade of furious bubbles

erupted from the surface of the water, popping and foaming as the cloud obscured what was happening beneath.

Just as I was about to jump in, something burst out.

Chul was steaming and smoking. His skin had taken on an ashen gray color, and molten veins ran along his arms, neck, and across his face. His eyes blazed with internal light, shining through the steam. As I watched, though, the discoloration receded from his flesh.

He put out a hand to the root on which I stood, using it to support himself. “Wipe away your frown of concern. I am uninjured.”

‘Heya, boss man, Sylvie’s getting all—’

I cursed, suddenly sensing the chaotic influx of aether beginning to surge against the relic armor as it leaked out and clawed at the air. I’d been too tuned into the monster and completely lost focus on containing the aetheric spell.

Grabbing Chul, I God Stepped as close as I could to the others. The space inside the sphere of broken paths was growing rapidly, and the atmospheric aether was thick around them. Concentrating on Sylvie, I pushed the spell back down until it was once again fully housed within the relic armor.

“This seems like it might be just a little bit of a problem,” Regis said.

Caera’s cheeks paled as she searched the surrounding forest, her sword clutched tight in both hands. “I never sensed a thing from that creature. Only caught hints of its movement from my relic. Could anyone else feel its mana?”

Ellie shook her head. Beneath her, Boo growled in frustration.

“I sensed its maw when it closed around me,” Chul said, his weapon tossed casually over one shoulder. “Still, it died easily enough.”

From the disbelieving expression on Caera’s face, I knew what she was thinking. Had that creature grabbed her or my sister, the attack would have played out very differently.

There was a shift in the mana around Ellie, and her eyes dilated dramatically. She leaned toward Chul and sniffed. “They may not give off a mana signature, but there is a distinct scent to them. Oily and…ew, gross. Like decayed fish. It’s kind of overpowering. Should be enough to tell me when one is around.”

“I do not see any reason for worry,” Chul said with a shrug. “I easily destroyed the skyray. If little sister can sniff them out from the stench left on my flesh, then we won’t be taken by surprise again.”

“Skyray? You know these creatures?”

Chul rested the head of his weapon on the ground and leaned on the haft. “I’ve heard tales of similar mana beasts in Epheotus. The abyssal skyray is an unparalleled predator, its mana control so perfect and its wings so swift that even phoenix hunters were sometimes taken unaware.”

“Abyssal skyray, huh?” Regis asked with a snort. “A little dramatic.”

“Does it really matter what it’s called?” Caera said, her neck on a swivel as she watched the trees. “What is our plan for getting through this zone with our lives?”

“The roots are too exposed,” I said, thinking out loud.

Down at water level, the roots stuck out, growing around each other in an intricate web. Above, the branches of the giant trees at least had foliage to offer us some cover. It seemed likely that these predators used them to stay out of sight while watching for anything that moved along the roots below. I could only hope we might be able to do the same.

Caera followed the direction of my gaze. “Do you think we could get above where these creatures hunt? With your ability to teleport, we could climb for miles with relative ease.”

“That’s not so simple.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “Any time I take my mind off Sylvie, her power surges unpredictably, which only puts us in more danger.”

“Ah, I can solve this easily.” Chul lifted Caera like a child and set her on Boo behind Ellie.

Caera froze, holding her breath until it was over, then released it with a gust. “*Please* do not do that again,” she said stiffly as she adjusted her seat on the bear, looking incredibly uncomfortable.

Chul’s confusion was clear, but he only shrugged. “Hold on to the beast.”

Kneeling, Chul reached beneath Boo and scooped the guardian bear and everyone else up in his arms. “If this creature is akin to the skyrays of Epheotus, it will be drawn to quick movement.”

Chul didn’t wait for a response before floating up into the air, moving slowly toward the branches above.

I waited, watching all around for any sign of an attack. The forest was calm, and no attack came.

Channeling God Step but not activating it, I watched the rough sphere of disconnected pathways rise with Sylvie. When Chul had safely set Boo down, I God Stepped to them, just outside the sphere of Sylvie’s influence. In the instant it took to do so, her spell lashed out, making my companions stutter like a graphical glitch in an old Earth video game.

I clamped down on my control over the effect, and everyone stabilized.

Caera quickly slid off Boo’s back, and I caught the glint of silver as her drones moved closer. “I don’t sense any movement nearby.”

Waving to the others, I pointed along the branch. It was wide enough for twenty soldiers to march side by side before curving steeply down at the edges.

Showing no hesitation, Chul led the way. We proceeded cautiously, both to avoid creating noise or sudden movements that might draw attention and to keep our footing on the rough bark. I walked next to Boo while Caera stayed between me and Chul.

Progress was slow, and the mood tense. My focus was split between concentrating on containing Sylvie’s spell, watching for any more skyrays, and searching for a path forward.

Caera and Ellie became our primary scouts. My sister's beast will enhanced her senses beyond what I could accomplish with aether, and Caera's drones let her search all around us for threats and easily-reached crossings between branches.

We moved outward, away from the tree's trunk, and the branch narrowed slightly as we went. Our first transition to another branch was relatively easy. I chose one that crossed directly below our own, but which would keep us going in relatively the same direction. We were able to hop down to it without incident.

Keeping this slow but steady pace, we passed from branch to branch for thirty minutes or more without incident.

"Arthur, the water." Ellie pointed over the edge to a wide stretch of clear lake below.

Formless red dots swirled in the lake, too far away to make out any detail. As I watched, a diamond-shaped shadow drifted down to the water, and a red speck leapt onto its back. In moments, the skyray and its passenger vanished into the forest.

"Something was riding it," Ellie said, leaning over the edge of the branch for a better look. "It looked—okay, this is weird, but it almost looked like a person."

"Something akin to the sentient beings we met in the snowy zone?" Caera asked, craning her neck curiously.

At a jolt of concern from Regis, I looked behind us just in time to see another skyray dive from above. Time seemed to slow down, and I watched the shadowy skyray descend foot by foot, inch by inch.

Conjuring an aetheric blade, I pivoted slightly, correcting my footing on the uneven bark, and leapt toward the monster. As I did so, its entire forward momentum ceased, then reversed, and it flew back up into the air out of reach. In a blink, it shifted again, changing position without seeming to move so that it was ten feet to the left of where it had been. Stranger still, I was back to standing on the branch.

Time, which had been nearly at a standstill, rushed forward so fast I couldn't react to the skyray's approach, not even to warn the others.

It struck our branch headfirst, its body splintering and gushing blood from the force. The branch shook so fiercely that I stumbled to one knee, my sense of balance already thrown off by being whipped back and forth in time and space.

Ellie screamed, losing her footing completely, and Boo had to snatch her by the back of her armor so she dangled from his jaws like a cub.

Caera stumbled forward, and it looked like she was going to fall off the branch, but her foot pressed against solid air, and she shoved herself back onto more stable footing. Beside her, Chul had spun and brandished his weapon, but he could only blink in bewilderment at the skyray's ruined body.

The branch shook again, and a tremendous *crack* resounded through the forest. The wood split where the skyray had struck, and the entire structure fell by a foot. Boo dug in his claws and hunkered low to the bark. Chul, reacting more quickly this time, grabbed Caera and floated up off the branch.

Making a split-second decision not to utilize any of my movement techniques, fearing that Sylvie's magic may prove more dangerous than a fall, I bolted for Sylvie and Ellie.

Wood and bark splintered. All several hundred feet of the branch sheared free and fell, and we fell along with it. I could only just make out Caera and Chul flying above us before my body twisted away.

Somewhere in the distance, near the thinner end, the falling branch struck another tree limb and broke again with a sound like an earthquake.

With its momentum very briefly slowed, I struck the falling branch just as it exploded through the solid wood of the other. Pushing with both my hands and feet against the rough bark, I threw myself at Boo. The resulting impact carried us both out into open air as the falling branch collided with yet another colossal tree limb and both shattered with an earth-shaking crash.

Boo and I landed on the lower branch in a tangle of limbs, the wood beneath us quaking sickeningly, the air full of my sister's screams.

Reinforcing my hold over the aether straining to break free of the relic armor's constraints, I jumped back to my feet and searched for my sister, who was no longer held in Boo's jaws. Regis manifested and went to Boo's side, immediately on guard for any creatures that might be drawn to the noise.

Ellie was dangling from a visible tether of mana beneath the broken branch I was standing on, splintered wood still raining down around her. Far below her, the two titanic branches crashed into the lake with enough force to shake the very foundations of the skyscraper trees.

Ellie was no longer screaming. She was breathing hard with sweat running down her face in sheets, all her focus on the mana supporting her.

Reaching down, I tried to grab the arrow that the tether was connected to, which Ellie had shot into the side of the broken branch, but when my flesh touched the mana, the entire spell trembled.

"Don't!" Ellie squawked, clutching the mana-rope firmly with both hands and closing her eyes in concentration. "I…can climb up."

Before I could respond, movement drew my focus into the depths of the forest as a black streak banked around a distant tree and sped toward Ellie. Three bizarre creatures were clinging to the skyray's back, chittering madly and brandishing strange, organic-looking weapons.

Aether coalesced in my fist to form a sword, but the energy pressing out from Sylvie surged as I split my attention.

Beams of black fire lanced down from a higher branch. Two burned across the skyray's back, making its flesh bubble and swell, like a scab forming. The third hit one of the creatures in the chest and sent it tumbling into the open air and down toward the waters below, still churning from the wreckage of falling branches.

Sparing a quick glance, I saw Caera pressed flat against the trunk of a neighboring tree, her sword out but focus entirely on controlling the drones. Chul was facing a second skyray as the creature wheeled above.

Behind me, Boo moaned in despair, dancing back and forth as he peered over the edge toward Ellie as she crawled hand over hand up the mana tether.

Regis suddenly bolted past me and leapt off the broken branch. His body swelled outward, the flames becoming jagged, his fur like sharpened spikes, wings sprouting from his back. He collided with the skyray, and Destruction leapt from his jaws as he tore into it midair. I felt it as dozens of knifelike legs, which ran in rows along the skyray's belly, cut and slashed at his hardened hide, but only in the same vague way the pain reached Regis's brain through the influence of Destruction.

Ellie reached the point where her mana arrow stuck out from the broken branch and got a handhold in the bark. I grabbed her by the back of her armor and lifted her easily onto solid ground—or at least, the closest proximity to solid ground we had. She wasted no time in dismissing her spell and taking cover at Boo's side.

Regis and the skyray were plummeting toward the lake hundreds of feet below. One of the creatures clinging to its back was thrusting a three-pronged spear at my companion, each impact like the sting of a bee, but the other was no longer visible.

Until a moment later, when it clambered up the side of the branch we were standing on, giving me my first good look at it.

Although humanoid in its torso and arms, a wide, flat tail covered in interlocked plates made up its bottom half. Like the skyray, the underside of this tail sprouted dozens of hooked legs that easily gripped the dense bark, letting it skitter across the tree's surface like a termite. Fins grew like wings from its back, and the entire humanoid torso was covered in very fine scales.

Clutched in its clawed, webbed fingers was a chitinous shortsword the same light-red hue as its scales. Four small eyes glared from above two slitted nostrils in its flat face, and its broad mouth opened in a snarl, revealing rows of needlelike teeth.

An arrow zipped past me, striking the crustacean creature in the chest. The mana arrow rippled outward, deflected, and then dissipated, failing to

damage its target.

Buttressing my hold on the relic armor and Sylvie within it, I split my focus and sent aether out to my muscles and joints, reinforcing not only my legs and lower body, but my shoulders, chest, and arms as well. If I was fast enough…

I stepped forward, utilizing the Burst Step technique to cross the distance between me and the creature in an instant. At the same time, aether flowed up my spine and through my shoulders, down my arms, and into my forearms, wrists, and knuckles. At each muscle and joint, the aether combusted in a perfectly timed burst, each driving my strike forward with an exponentially growing amount of speed and force.

The mercreature's upper body came apart in a gory red spray as my fist collided with its sternum. Its lower body stumbled back and forth for a breath before tipping off the side of the branch and spiraling downward toward the distant water.

Despite my best effort, my ironclad grip on Sylvie's spell slipped. From the corner of my eye, I saw Ellie and Boo stutter, and the arrow conjured against Ellie's bow string exploded. She was lifted off the ground and slammed into Boo's side.

I sprinted to catch her before she fell. She was shaking and staring down at her arm in shock. The dwarven bow had splintered, and a bone was protruding through the skin of her forearm.

"El!"

She pushed against my chest with her good hand and took a halting step away. "G-give me some room to breathe, Art…"

Mana wrapped around her forearm before tightening like a splint. Ellie gave an agonized cry and sagged back against Boo, trembling from head to toe, and the mana sputtered.

I ripped free a chunk of bark. "Here, bite down on this." I held it up, and she took it between her teeth.

Boo rumbled and pressed his nose against her cheek. Golden light suffused her, traveling down into her chest, and the shaking eased.

The conjured splint continued to tighten, forcing the bone back beneath the skin. With a twist of her arm, she set the broken bones back into place. Though swollen and purple, the steady flow of blood slowed to a trickle, held in by the mana.

She wiped away her tears with the back of her good arm, then struggled to stand straight. “Something mom showed me, just in case. Now c-come on…” Although her face was pale and beaded with sweat, she straightened. “We can’t waste any more time.”

Nodding, I turned away, curling and uncurling my own hand.

My arm, from my knuckles to shoulder, twinged with pain. The Burst Strike technique seemed like a natural extension of Burst Step now that my asuran physique could handle the strain, but I’d had precious little time to practice it. Unlike a step, where all my carefully executed pushing force went down into the ground and was absorbed, a punch fueled by so much speed and precision delivered almost as much impact back to me as it did to my target, causing a series of micro-tears and fractures up my arm.

Clenching my fist, I followed along with my body’s healing, aware of each torn muscle and strained tendon as they fused, wishing I could extend the same power to my sister and heal her arm.

But there was no time to linger on my mistakes. Ellie jerked to a stop as she clambered one-handed onto Boo’s back, staring into the limbs above. “I heard wind over wings. And…I can smell another one.”

There was no more discussion before we began moving again, sprinting along the branch with Chul at the front. Ellie, her arm bound in a sling and her weapon destroyed, stayed on Boo’s back, her good arm holding onto Sylvie. Caera rushed along between Boo and Regis, half her focus on the drones zipping through the foliage around us. Although I couldn’t sense the skyray’s mana signatures, I kept Realmheart active, watching the movement of both mana and aether for any sign of further danger.

Before we'd even transitioned to the next branch, a speeding skyray passed overhead, moving in the direction of the fallen limbs. Thanks to Ellie and Caera's warning, we were able to duck into a thicker patch of sail-sized leaves, letting it vanish behind us.

But as we came out of our hiding spot, another appeared, this one with two of the crustacean mercreatures riding on its back. One clicked and squawked, jabbing its two-pronged spear in our direction.

I let out a frustrated curse. "Go! Keep moving!"

Slamming the ball of his weapon into the palm of his hand, Chul sprinted onward. Boo sped up to match him, but I could tell Caera was struggling to split her focus. She seemed to consider for a moment, then leapt on Regis's back. He paused only long enough to let her situate herself, then bolted after the others.

In an instant, the skyray spun around and came down from behind us, but it didn't attack. Instead, it released a subsonic vibration like the death knell of the first one we'd encountered. Pushing aether into my ears to dampen the noise, I stared around, certain of what would come next.

As I expected, another skyray appeared from behind the first. Then a third, banking sharply through a thick tangle of branches to our right.

"There are two more below us," Caera said, twisting around on Regis's undulating back to face me. "Each with a handful of those scaled creatures. They're penning us in!"

Considering the skyrays' speed, there was no way for us to outmaneuver them. With this being such an obviously coordinated attack, however, I knew that stopping to fight it out might allow even more enemies to find us. "Keep moving," I ordered after taking a second to think.

Sylvie, now would be a great time to snap out of it, I thought, not expecting a response.

Suddenly one of the skyrays wheeled around and set down on the branch a hundred feet ahead of us. Its three riders scrambled off, then split up, crawling along the sides and beneath the branch itself. Another skyray

landed behind us, and two more riders dismounted, their weapons drawn as they charged toward us on dozens of knifelike legs.

Black beams of soulfire scored the air. Two struck the skyray, causing the flesh to bubble and pop. The other two beams fired left and right, aimed at the mercreatures skittering along the vertical edge of the branch.

At the same time, a glowing white bolt shot from Ellie’s palm. It curved down around the outer edge of the branch, followed an instant later by a concussive blast that I felt through my soles.

I focused on Sylvie, on the armor and the spell surrounding her body. Keeping Sylvie’s unconscious spell in check was my priority.

With Sylvie fully centered in my consciousness, I utilized just the periphery of my thoughts to conjure an aetheric blade forty feet behind me and slash wildly with it.

The attack was clumsy, swinging too short, and the crustacean mercreature jumped back to avoid it. And even that failed effort caused a time-space jolt that made Boo miss his footing and stumble, nearly toppling my wounded sister.

Still, in the second that bought us, Chul’s round-headed mace went flying. He threw it like a missile, and the fissures in the head roared with flames before ripping through flesh and bone and nearly splitting the monster in half.

To our left, a red-tinged mercreature scampered up the branch’s side, its many stabbing legs easily clinging to the thick bark. Streaks of soulfire scored the air like the shadows of Ellie's conjured bolts, throwing the mercreature off balance for Regis to finish with a whip-crack slash of his tail.

Chul sprinted right over the corpse of the skyray as his weapon returned to his hand, and Boo and Regis kept pace as we continued in his wake.

“Below us!” Ellie shouted, pointing toward the base of a neighboring tree.

Moving like termites, dozens of the mercreatures were rapidly scaling the towering structure. They moved up as fast as we were able to sprint along

the horizontal surface, and it seemed as if they intended to cut us off.

I scanned the nearby branches through a hail of spellfire, looking for a way to change course.

Without my full arsenal of abilities, there was nowhere else to go but straight forward. As we ran, I also searched the shadows of every branch and root for any signs of an exit portal. This zone wasn't a limited space like a cave, but more like Three Steps' snow-covered zone, or the desert Taci and I had destroyed. In both places, which seemed to expand forever, the zone itself had led me to the destination. We had followed the branches in the most natural direction, which I hoped meant—

My eyes caught on something, a straight edge among rough and winding organic shapes. I only barely noticed it, half-hidden within a cluster of entangled roots far out into the lake below us.

Ellie confirmed my suspicions immediately, her glowing brown eyes focused into the distance. "It's the portal!"

10

HOLDING GROUND

CAERA DENOIR

The bottom dropped out of my stomach as Regis leapt off the side of the gargantuan branch on which we'd been running. Trees larger than even the most grandiose cathedrals and palaces rose all around us, their branches crossing over and beneath one another in an incomprehensible network both above and below. Under me, Regis's flesh began to writhe.

His back broadened, and his fur hardened into spines. The purple flames of his mane grew jagged, more solid, nicking me and drawing a line of blood across my forearm. Wings sprouted from his back, catching our momentum.

Being so close, the Destruction emanating from him made my bones ache.

Two skyrays swerved to pursue us.

"On our left!" I barked as beams of soulfire leapt from my blade and scored the beasts' flesh, leaving bubbly raised scars in the black hide.

Regis banked hard as a skyray slammed into us from the side, and I could focus on nothing but maintaining my seat on his back. Purple fire blazed between his teeth, and he ripped a chunk out of our attacker's wing. The

flames spread from the wound quickly, consuming the beast as it plummeted from the sky.

We spun in the air, headed back toward our branch, where the others were fully engaged in combat. Grey shouted something, and Eleanor stood up on her bear's back. Regis snatched her in his paws, then wheeled around again, descending toward the portal frame in the distance.

Glancing behind us, I watched as Grey pulled Sylvie from Boo. Even amid the chaos, there was such tenderness to the way he held her.

With a sudden burst of agony, a three-pronged chitin spear struck me in the leg, punching through the mana cladding my body and the flesh beneath before piercing Regis's side. I hissed with pain and nearly tumbled off when Regis banked hard to avoid a volley of spears thrown by the horde of crustaceans crawling up the tree.

"You good?" Regis asked, the concern clear even in his guttural growl.

"Yeah," I hissed through gritted teeth. "Don't slow down!"

As I struggled with the spear, several of the crustaceans leapt from the sides of the tree. The frills along their shoulders expanded out like wings to catch the wind. First a few, then a dozen, then more glided after us.

At a thought, my orbitals drew in close. The mana resonated between them, conjuring a shield around us. Another spear glanced off the shield, then a small blade.

We arrived at the small island of knotted roots just ahead of them, but skyrays were already circling. Regis began transforming, and I slipped off his back, one hand holding the spear steady. Boo appeared next to Eleanor with a burst of mana, but I was focused on the approaching horde as I wrenched the spear free and tossed it aside.

Suddenly the gliding crustaceans were in disarray, falling like stones or banking hard away. A smokey-skinned figure plowed through their formation, and I held my breath as Chul ripped the frills off one of the monsters, drove his fire-imbued fist into another, causing it to go up like kindling, before slamming two more together so hard I heard the crunch from where I stood.

They gave up their pursuit of us and dove into the water to escape him, giving him time to land beside me.

Following the constrained pressure his bond exuded, I found Grey, Sylvie in his arms, leaping between two branches. A skyray dove for him mid-leap, but Sylvie's spell pulsed, and the skyray froze in midair, sped up sickeningly, and vanished behind a tree.

Grey was rushing from branch to branch, moving downward and in our direction as best he could with Sylvie cradled in his arms, her body still wrapped in his conjured armor. When several crustaceans moved to cut him off, he flashed forward with such speed that they were blasted off the branch. A couple plummeted, unconscious and unable to save themselves, while the others threw out their frills and drifted to other branches or down into the water.

The zone rocked as Chul bashed his weapon into one of the roots leading to our island. Wood exploded, burning splinters flying like knives in every direction. Flames raced along the wood toward a group of crustaceans. A few were caught in the blaze, while others escaped to the water with enraged, gurgling chitters.

A transparent, smokey black bubble of mana appeared around us. Chitinous projectiles slammed into it an instant later, sending tremors through the mana.

"We just need to hold until Grey catches up," I said, considering our options.

The strain on Chul's mana reserves showed clearly in his glazed eyes and erratic breathing. Eleanor had mounted Boo, her broken arm cradled against her stomach as mana swirled around her. Eager tension was emanating palpably from Regis, the only one of our number who didn't seem to have been taxed by this battle.

The frequency of projectiles quickly increased until the whole shield was trembling and barely maintaining its form.

Suddenly there was a lull in the barrage.

From the smoking ruins of the root that Chul had destroyed, a blurred form burst into sight, sprinting toward us. The speed of Grey's passage gusted away the smoke, revealing dozens of corpses beyond.

I dropped the shield as he raced onto the knot of roots and into the alcove where the portal frame was hidden. A subtle glow infused the alcove, bathing Grey in pale light as the portal activated.

The light dimmed, and the shield reformed above us just before a skyray slammed into it.

As I held it there, straining against the Relictombs beast's strength, Grey cursed, and my heart sank. He had the Compass in hand, but the face of the portal was distorted with static.

As if feeling my eyes on him, he turned and shook his head. "It's not working."

The shield emanating from my orbitals gave out.

Phoenix fire, Destruction, and pure mana all struck the attacking skyray at once. Its subsonic death knell stole my breath away, and I barely brought my blade around in time to deflect a thrown spear.

Chul grunted in pain and went to one knee as the dying skyray crashed into the water.

"Eleanor, help Chul!" I ordered, knowing someone needed to take charge or we would collapse under the weight of these constant attacks.

"On it!"

Eleanor's gaze flickered toward her bond, and Boo rushed in front of Chul, taking a spear to the side. White light emanated from Boo into Eleanor, and then from her to Chul. His mana signature swelled, but the drain on Eleanor was clear, even after borrowing mana from Boo.

The water erupted in front of me, and a crustacean landed heavily on the root's edge. It was broadly muscled with scales the color of dried blood. Huge pincers clicked together in place of hands. It chittered dangerously,

eyeing me for a long moment, then scrambled forward, its pincers outstretched.

A bolt of pain ran up my leg as I shifted my weight to bat aside one pincer before hacking across my attacker's ribs, the crimson blade igniting with dark fire. I felt a jolt of fear as the sharp edge of my sword drew only a thin line of dark blue blood.

One pincer snapped out and closed around my blade. My arms jarred painfully as they were pulled to a halt mid-swing. The other claw opened wide as it carved toward my neck. I knew, in the second between one thought and the next, that the strike would take my head off.

Golden light suffused me as something hit me from behind, and the claw cracked against it. I stumbled backward just as the light shattered. Instead of taking me solidly on the side of the neck, the pincer's sharp tip slashed across my clavicle. My sword jumped forward, soulfire burning black over the red steel, and plunged into the monster's open mouth and up through its brain. Its furious little eyes rolled, and it slumped off the root and back into the water.

Spinning, I saw Eleanor staring at me, breathing hard, and although I didn't know how, I knew she had just saved my life. "Thank you," I said, gingerly prodding my wound. It was deep, and the bone beneath had broken, but I didn't think it would be life-threatening in the short term.

She nodded, then set about trying to remove the spear from Boo's thick hide with her one good arm.

Inside the alcove, Grey had laid Sylvie down and was kneeling next to her. I could just hear the soft words he spoke only for her. "…you to listen to me, okay, Sylv? It's time to go. We can't leave until you come back to us. I need you to wake up now, okay?"

As he spoke, the pressure of his intent built until it became difficult to breathe. Perhaps sensing the change, our attackers faltered, pulling back, the zone full of the noise of their alien chittering. I could see now that more crustacean creatures were swimming in from the waters all around us.

There was a roar of warning from above.

Regis, again in his Destruction form, was flying tight circles over the knot of roots. All around him, the skyrays swarmed.

Each was large enough to cover the entire island in its shadow, and yet they flowed past each other as they flew like a school of fish. Three closed in on Regis, the first melting away in a gout of Destruction. The second, though, ripped at Regis's wing as it passed, and the third slammed into him head-on, sending him spinning in the air.

Another descended upon the rest of us, its twin tails curled beneath it like hooks. As it flew past, those tails lashed out. Eleanor threw herself onto her stomach, screaming when she landed badly on her broken arm.

Boo caught one tail in his jaws, heedless as the barb stabbed into his ribs. The other deflected against a soulfire shield.

The skyray jerked midflight, and its tail ripped free. Its massive bulk was pulled violently off course so that it collided with a neighboring root before splashing down onto its back, the many legs churning feebly as it sank.

Waves of fire were rolling off Chul, holding back a small army of crustaceans. Whenever one reached the island, a burst of force from the many discs of condensed mana Eleanor had set as traps around the edge of roots sent it splashing back into the lake.

And yet there seemed no end to the zone's occupants.

Regis hit the ground hard, crushing a couple of crustaceans beneath him. Purple flames licked between his teeth and raced to his paws and tail as he spun, snapped, and clawed at any monster that came too close. Even as he fought, he shrank, reverting to his normal shadow wolf form.

A spear glanced off the smokey mana sheathing Chul's body, but an instant later a chitin dagger punched through it and sank between his ribs. In front of me, two of the crustacean creatures jumped onto the roots, one with a forked spear, the other swinging a net woven from fibrous plants.

The net flew, opening as it did so. A beam of black fire sliced through the fibers, and I unleashed a wave of soulfire with my sword. Both enemies leaned into it, turning their flat faces away. Their scales blackened and cracked in places, but neither were destroyed.

As their gazes returned to me, a shining bolt of mana lodged into the top right eye of one. It screeched and fell back into the water, which sprayed up like a geyser a second later as the bolt exploded. The other ducked under another mana bolt before skittering over the bark toward me. It caught my blade in the forked spear and turned it aside, nearly wrenching the weapon from my grip.

I limped back, dislodging my blade and avoiding a swiping claw, but the foot of my wounded leg turned in a gap between roots, and I fell. Mana exploded against the crustacean's side, but it only rocked back for an instant before its spear came up again. Eleanor screamed and Boo roared. The spear came down, and I caught it with my sword, partially deflecting it.

The prongs punched through my armor and arm alike, pinning me to the wood below. Pulling back both legs, I conjured wind into them. When the monster fell on me, I kicked with all my might, unleashing a blast of wind-attribute mana along the length of my legs. My attacker was lifted off its feet and sent tumbling off the roots and back into the water.

The kick sent a lightning bolt of pain up my leg, and stars burst behind my eyes.

Several more magical blasts went off. I could hear Chul bellowing his war cry and Regis snarling.

Turning over, I experienced a flash of déjà vu as I pulled the crustacean spear from my flesh before letting it fall to the ground. Nearby within the root cave, Grey was kneeling next to the portal frame and Sylvie. His eyes were closed, his brows furrowed in concentration, sweat beading on his forehead. A gentle purple light was radiating from him and his bond. His lips were moving, but I couldn't read them.

"Grey…Grey!" My voice cracked as I shouted, my head swimming as I unintentionally put pressure on my cracked clavicle.

From the corner of my eye, I watched as Chul was swallowed in a wave of crustaceans as they poured over the edge of the island. To my other side, Regis and Boo were standing over Eleanor. She was curled into a ball and cradling her broken arm. The mana bracing it was gone, and blood was

flowing freely. Even as I watched, two more spears hit the guardian bear, lodging in his tough hide.

A sharp pressure broke the surface of the flesh around my calf, and I was suddenly dragged backward. Another huge blood-red crustacean had me in its pincer and was pulling me toward the water. My blade came down on its arm just below the claw, shearing it off, but already two more were reaching for me, grabbing me.

My fingers skated across the slimy, blood-slick surface of the roots, unable to get purchase. My wounds screamed with each desperate movement, but this was buried beneath the churning waters of my panic.

Something struck my elbow, and my hand went numb. The handle of my sword slipped from my grasp.

Rolling over, I kicked furiously, sending out bursts of wind with each blow. It wasn’t enough.

A massive pincer raised above me like a guillotine.

Then…everything stopped. The noise, the pressure, the grasping claws, even the shadow of a skyray enveloping the root island.

Slowly, I looked down at my legs. The crustacean whose claw I’d severed was reeling away, its face a hideous mask of pain and fury, strings of blue blood frozen in the air around its wound. Another held me, its claws pinched around my leg. The third reared over me with its pincer outstretched.

Repeated wet crunching interrupted the silence. Chul had dragged himself out of the pile. His massive weapon was falling on unmoving enemy after enemy, but each swing came slower than the last, and he was wobbling drunkenly.

Eleanor used her good arm to drag herself up Boo’s side. She looked to be on the verge of passing out.

Finally, I looked within the cave.

Sylvie was on her feet. Grey was at her side, supporting her. The asura's eyes were glowing, the gold flecked with amethyst motes.

"I can't…hold this long…" she said wearily, sagging against Grey.

"Everyone, hurry!" I shouted, jerking free of the immobile crustaceans and dragging myself to my feet. "To the portal!"

Groaning with pain, Eleanor clutched Boo's fur as he half guided, half pulled her toward the portal frame. Chul had stopped swinging, and his weapon had vanished. He seemed on the verge of collapse when Regis appeared next to him, taking some of the half-phoenix's weight. Inside, Grey had already turned around and was channeling aether into the Compass.

When the relic activated, the portal shifted to reveal a ghostly outline of what lay beyond.

Time slipped back into sequence with a feeling like my ears popping. Grey vanished in a violet flash, reappearing outside the mouth of the cave of tangled roots, his blade carving through the crustaceans that had attempted to drag me into the water.

I stumbled forward and into the portal.

My feet moved from slick bark to solid stone bathed in golden white light from the huge portal now at my back. I swayed dizzily. My heart was pounding, each beat throbbing in my blurred vision. I focused on controlling my breath, reining in the heady, post-battle rush. Long moments passed before I finally found the strength to lift my head up.

The terrace, usually full of excited bustle, was empty and dour by comparison. A few dozen ascenders stood at stiff attention, their focus primarily on the various entries into the terrace. A handful, along with a couple of clerks, were looking at me expectantly, although their brows rose higher the longer they stared.

Before I could speak, Eleanor and Boo appeared beside me, then Chul opposite them.

"Caera!"

“Lauden?” I breathed, disbelieving.

My adoptive brother broke away from a group of guards and came running. The attendants who had been staring at me slack-jawed took a step back, exchanging strained glances.

My surprise turned to shock when Lauden wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him in a familial embrace. I waited wordlessly for something to happen, my breath catching in my chest.

After a few seconds, he pulled back and cleared his throat. “We were afraid you had…” He trailed off as his focus shifted to the horns growing from my head. “So it’s true. You really are Vritra-blooded.”

I touched my horns, having forgotten. “How did you know?”

“Scythe Seris. She explained to me—well, she told our parents, and they told me…” He stared at the horns for several heartbeats before wrenching his eyes away. They landed on my injuries, which he seemed to notice for the first time, and his face fell. “You’re wounded! Come with me, I’ll—no, wait, I’ll have people brought here. Bring them seats!” he snapped at the nearby soldiers, who were watching with growing interest.

Eleanor was leaning against Boo, blood weeping from several wounds, her eyes barely open.

In worse shape was Chul, who sagged as I looked at him, as if the weight of my attention was more than he could shoulder. The ground trembled as he collapsed to one knee, his eyes tightly shut and breath coming in labored gasps. “I am…fine,” he said, his words slurred.

“Nonsense, we can—”

Grey, Regis, and Sylvie appeared beside Boo.

“—bring healers…” Lauden finished before noticing the new arrivals. He took an involuntary step back, his eyes going wide as full moons. “Ascender Grey…”

Grey hardly acknowledged Lauden, going straight to his sister’s side. He tipped her chin up so he could look into her eyes. Over his shoulder, he

said, “Yes, healers. Whoever you have. Quickly.”

Eleanor brushed Grey’s hand away and stood up straight, taking her weight off the guardian bear. When she started walking toward Chul, Boo followed.

Grey reached for her, but Sylvie rested her fingers lightly on his forearm, and so he turned to her instead. Something passed between them unspoken, and some of the tension in Grey’s shoulders relaxed.

I felt Lauden approach to stand at my side, and together we watched as Eleanor once again drew mana from her bond and instilled it directly into Chul’s core. “Vritra’s horns,” he whispered. “What is happening right now?”

“I could ask you the same,” I said, not yet having shaken off the uncharacteristic joy he had displayed upon seeing me. “Why are you here?”

“I’m in charge of a rotation guarding the portal,” he said without taking his eyes off the others. “Our highblood split right down the middle. Half followed Father into the Relictombs while the rest sided with Justus.”

“Corbett and Lenora sided with Seris?” I asked, unable to believe it. “Publicly?”

Chul grew strong enough to stand, and Eleanor stumbled back. He scooped her up and set her on top of her bear. Both looked simultaneously grateful and exhausted beyond words.

Lauden let out a weak scoff. “Our dear Great-uncle Justus did it for them.”

I knew highblood politics well enough to understand, but I had no head for it in the moment. I had been doing my best to ignore my wounds so far, and I hadn’t forgotten why we were there. “Where is Seris? Is she…”

Lauden’s expression darkened. “Most of our healers will be with her.”

“She’s waited for me long enough.” I looked at my companions, weariness creeping in with each syllable I spoke. “Let’s get moving.”

Regis nudged me with his head. “Get on.”

Grateful to take the weight off my wounded leg, I eased onto his back. Together, we all left the terrace and went through the plaza where ascenders would normally have looked for groups for their ascents. Like the portal terrace, it was eerily empty. Lauden walked just ahead of us, and although he shot occasional glances back at me, he said nothing else.

He's changed, I thought. Whether it was from fear of the circumstances or from growth in maturity, I didn't know, but my adoptive brother no longer acted like the spoiled highblood Corbett and Lenora enabled him to be.

We proceeded directly along the main boulevard toward the portals between levels. People peered out at us, but no one approached. I saw familiar innkeepers and store proprietors and realized that they had been stuck in here as well. *It's amazing Seris has been able to maintain control for this long.*

Despite having discussed some details of a potential plan to cut off access to the Relictombs, I still couldn't believe what I was seeing when we reached the zone's entrance.

Surrounding the bank of portals that normally made transit between the first two levels of the Relictombs a simple matter was an array of unusual devices. Constructed of a similar blue-tinged metal as those we'd used to capture Orlaeth, the metal housings contained large mana crystals, connecting them with artifacts shaped like bowls turned on their side. The entire structure was a mess of thick wire.

Visible striations of contorted mana emanated from the bowls to the portals, distorting their normally smooth surfaces.

Surrounding these devices—several per mana crystal—were a few dozen mages. As best I could tell at a glance, they were channeling immense quantities of mana into the crystals.

It was only after taking all this in that I realized there were many other people around. Most were armed and attentive ascenders. Guards, some of whom focused on Grey, clearly recognizing him, moved hands to weapons as they stared down Chul, Boo, or even Sylvie, their nervousness writ plain in the tense lines of their faces.

But there were also a large number of mages bustling about. Some appeared to be waiting; others were helping fatigued men and women leave the plaza. A few people were lying on cots or being carried to a nearby building, which I guessed had been retrofitted to be a hospital.

I was momentarily confused by this, unsure what would be causing so many injuries. Then one of the mages tending the mana crystals collapsed.

A handful of others hurried to his side, and I was surprised to see Eleanor there as well. Despite her own mana signature wobbling with the effort, she channeled what little mana she had into the mage, bringing him back from the edge of backlash. Those holding him watched this in wonder, slack-jawed and wide-eyed as the unconscious mage in their arms stirred.

Eleanor stepped back, allowing them to help the mage away. Meanwhile, another mage had stepped in to take the place of the first.

And at the center of all this was my mentor.

Seris was kneeling on a cushion next to a glass container filled with glowing blue liquid. Inside the container rested the severed head of Sovereign Orlaeth Vritra, or what was left of it. The flesh had decomposed in ragged patches, the hair melted away, and empty sockets stared soullessly out through the glass.

Seris's eyes were closed and ringed by dark shadows. She seemed pale, her mana signature weak. One hand was dipped into the open container, her fingers clenched around Orlaeth's horn.

She's powering the device herself. This slow-dawning realization left me cold with disbelief.

Cylrit was standing beside her, watching us approach. He stared at Grey for what felt like a very long time, then bent down and said something softly in Seris's ear.

She startled, her fingers spasming around the horn, and a ripple ran through the mana distortions aimed at the portals.

Her eyes opened slowly, and she had to blink several times before she could focus on Cylrit's face. She did not speak, but her gaze slipped from the

retainer to Grey, and her spine straightened.

“It looks like our roles are reversed from our first meeting, Seris,” Grey said. Although he was outwardly rigid, his tone was soft, consoling. “You sent for me, and I’m here. But I’m not sure how I can help you.”

She shook her head, sending a cascade of pearl-colored hair spilling into her face. When she spoke, her voice was raw. “Orlaeth…the horn—lasted until…” She trailed off, her features going slack with confusion.

My hand reached instinctively toward her, my fingers twitching with the desire to help, to somehow make this better. I could not recall ever seeing Seris so weak, so broken. I wanted to apologize, to beg for her forgiveness, but I held myself back, forced my emotions into check. Grey was who she needed now, not me.

Seris’s strength and support were the bedrock upon which my life had been built. Seeing her like this didn’t fit cleanly into reality as I understood it. She was immovable, immutable…and apparently, at the limit of her prodigious abilities.

“They test the portals constantly…at irregular intervals.” Seris paused to take a breath. “Without the mana from Orlaeth, mages have had to channel around the clock, while I have operated as the focus. If we stop…” She trailed off tiredly.

“They’ll know in minutes,” Cylrit finished for her. “It’s been two weeks like this. Scythe Seris hasn’t moved, hasn’t slept. She—” Cylrit cut himself off as his voice broke, the strongest display of emotion I had ever seen from the stoic retainer. “We’ve failed to come up with a workable solution to redirect the mana without her acting as focus. Several theories had already been considered before we arrived here, but they have all failed.”

“If only Wren or Gideon were here,” Grey said under his breath, taking in the situation with a thoughtful frown.

“Why not just destroy the portals?” I blurted out, looking from face to face. “I’ve seen Grey bring old, broken portals back to life before.”

I knew Seris wouldn’t have forgotten about this, of course, but as loath as she had been to put herself into such a vulnerable position, I knew she

wouldn’t destroy relics created by the djinn either unless she knew they could be recreated.

“Without a chance to experiment, we were unsure what exactly was possible,” Cylrit answered. His eyes jumped to Seris for a heartbeat, then back to me, continuing quietly. “Although, if this had gone much farther, I would have—”

“Never disobeyed a direct order,” Seris cut in, firm despite her condition.

“Even I can’t promise it would work,” Grey added, his golden eyes locked on the portals. “But is all this”—he waved his hand around at the equipment—“really worth the suffering and risk?”

Seris didn’t answer, and the conversation was interrupted as a couple of the healers finally turned their attention to us. They hurried to set Eleanor and me down on nearby cots and began tending to our wounds. They poked and prodded at me, slathered me in rejuvenating ointment, and cast spells to speed my healing and reduce the pain.

Throughout, though, my focus remained on Seris and Grey, and the problem they now faced.

I wanted to offer advice, solutions, ideas…to make use of the training Seris had provided over these last several years. But my mind was clouded with pain, fear, and most of all regret. I couldn’t avoid asking myself what I had to contribute when I was surrounded by Scythes, retainers, asuras, and… whatever the hells Grey was.

Arthur, I reminded myself. *Arthur Leywin, Lance of Dicathen.*

I wanted what I’d always wanted—to be at the center of everything. To be the instrument of change. That was Sevren’s dream, which he had left to me when he’d vanished into the Relictombs. And now I was closer than he ever could have imagined to realizing true change in Alacrya, but I wasn’t the catalyst for that change.

No, that honor belongs to a man they literally call Godspell…

My thoughts trailed off, and then, without meaning to, I burst out with a manic laugh that startled the healer working on my shoulder so badly that

she jammed the broken clavicle. My laugh turned into a pained groan.

Everyone looked at me, and I felt myself flush. “Apologies, but I…I think I might have an idea.”

11

A LOOSE IDEA

ARTHUR LEYWIN

“It was a loose idea at best, Arthur,” Caera said with uncharacteristic hesitance, her tone almost pleading. “A whim really. If it’s not possible… I’m not an artificer. You don’t need to take it so seriously…”

I was sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of Seris with Realmheart active, the violet runes it conjured burning beneath my eyes as I carefully watched her focus mana into and through the rotting head of Sovereign Orlaeth. “I’m taking it seriously because I think it might just work.”

Caera’s answering frown was contemplative as it turned from me to Seris. I followed her gaze.

Seris’s alabaster skin was sickly gray and covered in a sheen of perspiration. Even since our arrival, she seemed to have shrunk into herself.

I needed to understand exactly what was happening between her, the machinery, and the cadre of other mages acting as a living battery.

At first, it seemed impossible that she had been able to keep this up for two weeks without rest. Her mana signature was incredibly weak, her core nearly empty. Her feat would not have been possible at all except for the fact that, in her desperation, she had developed her own rudimentary

version of mana rotation that allowed her to absorb and purify mana from the atmosphere while also channeling it into the horn.

I followed the mana as it was drawn in through her veins to her core, where there was a constant swirl of purification before black-tinged mana was released to trail down her arm and into the gory artifact. From there, it seemed to condense rapidly—some inborn trait of the Vritra's horn that I didn't understand—before being drawn out again by the bright blue liquid.

The mana took on a darker hue after being released by the horn. Metallic wiring then guided it to several large crystals. These were being constantly imbued by a handful of mages each. Thanks to Realmheart's ability to see the individual mana particles, I was able to follow along as chunks of stored mana were pulled out of the mana crystals and into artifacts that reminded me of old-school Earth satellite dishes.

These dishes, which were covered in a complex diagram of runes, condensed and projected the mana in such a way that it distorted the portals, creating something like a feedback loop in which the portals still existed, but anyone coming through them wouldn't be able to leave before being drawn back through the portal and deposited on the other side.

As Cylrit explained it, the blue liquid was an alchemy of pulverized mana crystals suspended in a biologically originated compound crafted mostly of mana beast cores and chemicals proven particularly adept at transmitting mana. In effect, Seris had invented a mana battery. In this case, however, the artifact was specifically designed to utilize Orlaeth's mana, and their attempts to pivot to alternative sources had proven unsuccessful.

Caera's idea would only be possible because of my presence.

After bursting out in a pained, manic laugh, Caera had grown nervous, clearly second-guessing herself. "Go on," I'd encouraged her, curious. My own mind was already whirling with ideas as I struggled to see how to help Seris, and her input was welcome.

After clearing her throat and waving away the frustrated healer who was tending to her wound—which looked much worse than I had originally thought—she had said simply, "I was just thinking of your…unique magic, and how you may be the only person who could possibly even do

something like this, but…could we somehow power this device using the abundant aether in the Relictombs?”

Her simple suggestion had firmly planted the attention of all the many mages in the plaza back on me. Since the moment I’d appeared inside the Relictombs’ second level, I’d been on the receiving end of countless stares. Some gazed at me with starry-eyed wonder, while others glowered distrustfully, but everyone turned away when I met their eyes.

I had become something of a mythical figure in Alacrya since the Victoriad, it seemed.

At least it meant that, when I took over and started giving orders to the mages operating the disruption artifact, everyone listened.

I’d already been watching Seris’s process for quite some time. She had left it to her people to answer my many questions as she instead focused on the continued transmittal of mana.

My sister was asleep on a cot straight ahead of me, Boo passed out beside her. Both had pushed themselves to the extreme in escaping the last zone. I was thankful that Ellie had trained so hard while I’d been gone for nearly two months, as Gideon’s and Emily’s testing had helped her discover an additional connection between Boo and herself. Her ability to imbue mana was limited by her own light-yellow core, but by drawing on Boo’s inherent mana, she could push far beyond her own limits.

As much as he burned out quickly, Chul recuperated just as fast. His many wounds were already scabbed over despite him not allowing the Alacryan healers to treat him. Now he paced around the outer perimeter of the plaza, drawing nervous looks from the ascenders.

Sylvie and Regis stayed near me. They kept their thoughts quiet and unobtrusive, but our connection was never entirely severed. Sylvie’s mind was buzzing with the aftermath of her experience in the Relictombs, but we hadn’t had a moment to talk about it. Regis, on the other hand, was laser-focused on my task, attentive to each detail. Even though I didn’t experience his thoughts directly, I could still feel the gears of his mind turning like the shadow of my own.

“There are three main obstacles to this sort of conversion,” I said softly so that only the handful of people directly around me could hear. “The battery housing was designed from the ground up to make use of this Vritra’s mana as a source. Because of how the basilisk’s physiology utilizes mana, the withdrawal and disbursement of that mana can’t be effective with any other source that I know of. A mana crystal just can’t be condensed enough to handle the draw.”

One of Seris’s Instillers shrugged uncertainly. “Yes, this has been the primary roadblock we’ve experienced. Seris’s active focus has been the only alternative to work so far, but that is obviously unsustainable.”

“That also means that this design is basically useless for the storage or transmission of aether,” I continued. “The second problem is the projection artifacts. The runes are specifically designed to work with mana, and not only that, but decay-attribute mana natively associated with the basilisk race.”

“We designed additional runework,” Cylrit replied. He was standing behind and beside Seris, looming over the tank where she held the Vritra’s horn, his arms crossed. “But without being able to channel enough pure mana, the alternative projection artifacts were useless. And it is exceedingly dangerous to switch between the designs, as taking down more than one or two of the artifacts weakens the disruption.”

I nodded, unsurprised. “But the biggest problem is that there is no way to collect ambient aether into the machine, even if we can correct the other two problems. I don’t even know if something like that is possible. Even the Relictombs themselves, which exist in a place entirely made of aether, degrade and collapse with time. The very nature of aether is counter to what we’re trying to do.”

Sylvie looked up, her gaze sharpening. “The armor draws in aether.”

I shook my head. “But to do anything with that aether, it still needs the person inside it.”

‘Listen, we’re not trying to revolutionize the way we power all artifacts across the world, right? We just need to get the little rebel queen here

unplugged and buy these people some time. So use me. I can draw in aether and focus it through the rest of this shit if you can make it all work.'

I hesitated. It was true that aetheric particles were naturally drawn to Regis; that fact was instrumental in my creation of the aether core to begin with.

We'd basically be replacing Seris with you. It would be a temporary bandage at best.

'It seems worth a try.' Sylvie rested her hand on Regis's mane. *'It will buy us all time at the very least.'*

I examined my bond carefully. Lines of worry creased her brow and the corners of her lips, and there was a deep-set fatigue in her eyes, but her thoughts were clear-headed.

Seris shifted slightly, and the distribution of the mana wobbled. Her eyes moved beneath the closed lids.

I sighed. We had no time for a lengthy exploration of what was possible. If we were going to do anything to help Seris and prevent Agrona's forces from piercing this level of the Relictombs, it needed to happen immediately.

"Tell me again about the fluid battery," I said, and one of the Instillers launched into a repeat of Cylrit's earlier explanation.

As they spoke, I watched the particles moving within the horn and the bright liquid. I examined the housing and wiring again, as well as the relationship between the severed Vritra head and Seris's mana. But I also paid careful attention to how the aether moved around this artifact as well. Because such a condensed amount of mana was suspended within the artifact, very little atmospheric aether existed inside of it.

With a thought from me, Regis became immaterial and drifted through the glass and into the rotting head within, casting dim purple light from the empty sockets.

'I kind of like how this empty skull doesn't have seven different counter-scenarios and plans intersecting across his thoughts at any given moment. You know, like a certain someone. I dare say it's almost peaceful,' Regis japed.

The effect was immediate. More aether was drawn into the battery, flowing into the space not taken up by mana.

Releasing aether from my core, I encouraged it toward the device, willing it to displace the mana if necessary. The mana compressed further, allowing more room for the aether, which was then in turn drawn into the head by Regis's presence. The horn didn't absorb or condense the aether like it did Seris's mana, but I hadn't expected it to. Basilisks had no natural affinity for aether.

"Bring one of the spare projection artifacts and explain the runes to me."

One of the Instillers hurried to comply, soon returning with the round, blue-tinted metal dish. He launched into a precise lecture about the function of the runes and how these differed from the ones currently in use. I was no expert in this matter, but I was the only one present with any insight into aether. Even as I thought this, though, I realized it might not be true.

"Does anyone here have knowledge of the bestowals?"

They exchanged looks, then Cylrit said, "There were two officiants on this level at the time it was taken. They are loyal to Agrona, so they were locked away within the High Hall with anyone else who fought against us."

"The bestowment ceremony requires activation of aether to work. The artifacts those officiants use are what make that possible. Sylvie, go with them and interrogate those men. Use the artifacts—the staff and the bracelet, primarily—to see if you can come up with a rune sequence that will allow these projection devices to utilize aether instead of mana."

"Of course," Sylvie said with a nod, her wheat-blond hair spilling down around the jet-black scales of the relic armor.

It made me feel more comfortable, somehow, to know that she was still being protected by it.

Sensing my thoughts, she raised a brow and gave me a wry smile, then hurried after the Instillers.

I returned my focus to the battery itself. The mechanism was designed to store and release mana with no consideration to aether. The high density of

mana within Orlaeth's horn allowed the battery to create a draw that naturally pulled the mana along the connected wiring to the rest of the devices.

The real question was how—or even if—it was possible to adjust this battery so that it stored and transmitted aether instead of mana.

With Regis attracting aether, it already filled all the space between the mana particles, giving the bright blue liquid a lavender hue. Focusing on this loosely stored aether, I pushed it toward the wires and was surprised when some small number of particles, caught between pockets of mana, were pulled along into the rest of the machine. It dissipated upon reaching the mana crystal, but that proved the aether could be transmitted like mana.

'Poop crystals,' Regis thought suddenly, bringing my thought process to a grinding halt.

What?

'The giant millipede,' Regis said seriously. *'The processed aether—poop crystals—some of them were about the same dimensions as these mana crystals. Maybe we can swap them out.'*

I looked at Seris, still sitting silently right in front of me, her mana flowing endlessly into the Vritra horn in her grasp. "Can you hold on for a bit longer?"

Her head tilted slightly to the side, letting a lock of pearl-colored hair fall across her closed eyes. I wasn't sure if she'd heard me, but then she nodded. "I can hear your mind whirling. Go, do what you need to do. I will be fine."

I hesitated, certain that no reasonable person would describe her current condition as "fine," but I knew what needed to be done, and that meant keeping her in place just a little while longer.

"Chul, come on," I said, hopping to my feet and heading out of the plaza.

Caera started to stand, but I waved her down. "Rest," I urged. "We won't be gone long."

“We’ll start here—the end of the chain and farthest from the source of power—and work backward,” the head Instiller, a mage of the Ainsworth highblood, said for what was probably the hundredth time as he instructed the other Instillers.

Sylvie had returned from the High Hall shortly after Chul, Regis, and I got back from the giant millipede zone. Sylvie and the Instillers, along with some less-than-eager assistance from the bestowal officiants and their artifacts, were able to mock up a combination of runes that proved capable of projecting aether with a similar effect as the current mana disruption.

I watched as the team quickly dismantled the device to replace the mana crystal and projection artifact. The moment the new equipment was in place, Regis began pushing aether out of the battery. It traveled along the wires, dissipating where it reached the other mana crystals but being absorbed into the newly placed aether crystal.

Nothing happened.

The Instillers’ faces fell. Cylrit’s jaw clenched. Caera was wringing her hands, her face pale as she looked on nervously.

It’s about intention, I thought to Regis. *Remember, the aether listens to you, responds to your intent. You can’t just push it; you have to guide it*.

I felt Regis’s focus sharpen, extending to the aether he had sent into the crystal.

A few particles displaced from the crystal, running into the projection artifact. Then a few more. Slowly but surely, a steady trickle, then a stream of aether was flowing, until suddenly the device activated.

A wave of amethyst light distorted the air between the artifact and the portals.

It was working.

A collective held breath was released as the Instillers cheered and clapped each other on the back. Cylrit gave me a firm nod, suddenly looking ten years younger.

Seris seemed oblivious, focused on the act of empowering all the other pieces of the disruption array.

“Well, come on!” the Ainsworth Instiller snapped. “No time to waste. Let’s get the rest of these converted over.”

One by one, they changed out the original pieces of their design with the new, aether-aligned parts. With each addition, I helped Regis by forcing more of the mana out of the battery and infusing it with my own aether instead, allowing him to focus on just maintaining the flow.

More and more people arrived in the plaza as we worked. I recognized a couple of faces, such as Sulla of Named Blood Drusus, High Mage of the Cargidan Ascenders Hall and, surprising me, Kayden of Highblood Aphelion, the wounded professor I had taught alongside at Central Academy. Kayden gave me a jaunty wave from the outskirts of the plaza, where he lingered with feigned disinterest. Many others were clearly ranking Highbloods or ascenders as well.

It was a technically arduous process, and time ticked by slowly as the Instillers labored. Altogether, it took hours before the last projection artifact was finally in place, the last crystal was changed, and all the mana was pushed out of the battery, leaving room for a significant deposit of aether.

Although I’d done little throughout, keeping Realmheart active for so long was taxing. It did not require a significant amount of aether to do so, but it was similar to keeping a muscle flexed for hours on end, and a dull headache was burning at the corners of my eyes.

It was with a feeling of relief that I released the godrune, feeling the energy burning up from under my skin in the shape of runes dissipating. At the same time, the visible motes of mana painting the zone in reds, yellows, greens, and blues faded away to nothing.

But something was different.

I rubbed at my sternum, feeling a tension there that I couldn’t immediately identify. Worried that I’d strained myself, I looked around at everyone else.

Cylrit’s fist was wrapped firmly around Seris’s forearm, and he eased her hand out of the battery tank, allowing the Instillers to seal it back up. At

first, Seris's mana kept flowing in an uninterrupted loop, spilling out into the atmosphere with no effect. Slowly, her eyes fluttered open, and she looked up, confused, into Cylrit's face.

"It's all right. You've held long enough. Let go."

The flow of mana abated, and Seris stared at her hand, which she seemed to be struggling to unclench.

Her mana, I realized with a start. Despite no longer channeling Realmheart, I could still sense her mana.

My insight into the godrune, which represented the relationship between aether and mana, had advanced without my even realizing it. I bit back a grin and closed my eyes, just *feeling* the mana signatures of everyone around me.

"Did it work?" Seris asked, snapping me back into the moment.

No one could answer yet. Together, we waited with breathless uncertainty. Even to the naked eye, the ripples in the air and portal surfaces were clear beneath a dim purple glow, but it wasn't until, a couple of minutes later, when an Alacryan soldier appeared briefly in one of the portals before vanishing again, that we all truly relaxed.

"It worked," I confirmed.

A cheer went up, and the Instillers and attendant mages collapsed into back-patting and embraces all around us.

How does it feel in there?

'I assume you're not talking about this rotting skull,' Regis shot back, sounding in good humor. *'Seriously, though, I've always wanted to be the little engine that could.'*

Sylvie snorted, her brows raised nearly into her hairline. *'You find the strangest details in Arthur's old Earth memories.'*

'Hey, "Strange Details" is going to be the name of my memoir.' Regis's laughter rang in my head as I turned away with a groan.

“I need to take Scythe Seris somewhere she can rest,” Cylrit said, her arm laced through his for support. “We will convene when—”

“No,” Seris said firmly. He started to object, but she cut him off again. “I will recover as we walk. Come, Arthur. Gather your companions.” She looked around, caught sight of Sulla, and gestured for him to approach. Unbidden, a couple of other men came with him. “Sulla, Harlow, send men to collect the Highlords, Matrons, and other ranking blood members. Have them gather at the Dread Craven within the hour.”

Chul helped Ellie and Caera to stand and mount Boo, and they fell in behind me while Sylvie stayed at my side. A handful of guards broke off from those stationed around the plaza and marched to either side of our party, while several more fell into position behind us. As we approached the boulevard that ran lengthwise across the zone, I realized that a large number of people were being held back by more guards.

I stopped walking, my body going rigid.

“What the hell are they doing here?” I asked, feeling my cheeks flush with anger.

“Professor!” Mayla jumped up and down, waving her arms to catch my attention. “Hey, Professor Grey!”

Next to Mayla, Seth of Highblood Milview rubbed his neck and smiled awkwardly, looking increasingly embarrassed.

Seris turned stiffly to acknowledge me. “Forgive me, Arthur. They were intended to be a…research project, of sorts.”

My fists clenched and unclenched at my sides. “You endangered these kids’ lives for a—” I cut myself off, full understanding dawning. “You wanted to know why their runes were so strong.”

Seris only nodded before turning away, and Cylrit continued walking.

I broke ranks and hurried over to where a couple of ascenders were holding back the pair of teenagers. Mayla was grinning wildly, but Seth looked nervous.

“Professor Grey, you’re back!” Mayla gushed, looking like she wanted to rush up and hug me. “*Everyone* has been talking about you, ever since you left. Some of the other students thought you’d disappeared forever, but Laurel was *so sure* you’d be back, and so was S-Scythe Seris…Vritra…” Mayla trailed off, her attention sliding to where Seris had yet again stopped and was now watching my conversation.

“Seth, Mayla, it’s good to see you both,” I said, giving them a small smile that I knew lacked any true warmth. “I can’t speak now, but when I have a moment, perhaps you two can help me understand—”

“Maybe you can help *us* understand something, *Professor*,” Seth said suddenly, cutting across me. His face was pale, and he was staring past me, not meeting my eye. “Who *are* you? Why…why did you do this to us? Get us into this? I…” He shook his head and trailed off, looking like he might be sick.

I hesitated to answer. I didn’t want to leave them feeling like everything that had happened to them was without reason, but I didn’t have time to tell them the truth in the right way. “I’ll explain what I can, later. Where are you staying?”

Glancing between me and Seth, Mayla gave me directions to the mansion of the Highblood that had taken them in. “See you soon?” she asked, the words almost pleading.

“As soon as I can.”

I returned to the others under Seris’s curious gaze, but she said nothing, and we began marching along again. The ascenders moved the crowd out of our way, and our own guards kept everyone well back.

I wasn’t heedless of the shouts that followed us, some pleading, others resentful and accusatory, but I was too on edge to give any of it much thought. Our victory with the portal disruptor already seemed like a distant memory as the weight of the problems still facing these people settled heavily onto my shoulders.

Cylrit and Seris led us to a three-story building that overlooked a small street several blocks from the High Hall, which loomed in the distance. I

was surprised both by the location and construction of the building. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting, but this wasn't it.

A sign depicting a split face, one half bright white and twisted into a cartoonish grimace of terror, the other pitch black and screaming a battle cry, marked the building as the Dread Craven. Constructed mostly of dark stone and wood, it reminded me of many inns I'd seen throughout both Alacrya and Dicathen.

Four mages guarded the door, which they opened as we approached. By the lack of surprise on their faces, word had already reached them about Seris's arrival.

"Not *quite* how I imagined you living," Caera said under her breath, having dismounted from Boo and limped in after me and Sylvie.

Seris turned, her face slack, like someone just woken from a deep sleep. "No, I suppose not. The previous owner attempted to fight his way out on the first day after we arrived, leading a number of his blood and employees to their unfortunate demise. Since this building was then vacant, I decided it would be a suitable base of operations."

Cylrit cracked a smile. "Besides, she enjoys dragging the highbloods all the way across the zone into the *low* part of town."

"Hush," Seris answered, waving her hand dismissively at her retainer. "And, perhaps, fetch me a drink?"

Cylrit nodded and headed toward the bar, which ran half the length of the back wall.

We were standing in a wide open tavern room, standard except that all the rectangular tables had been pushed together in the center. It was unusually clean for an inn or bar, and the walls were barren, all their decorations having been taken down at some point. The lower windows had all been barricaded over by an earth-attribute mage, and the walls reinforced in places to provide a more defensible base.

A door behind the bar led to some back room, and a set of stairs dominated the left side of the open tavern. A couple of people—members of Seris's staff, I assumed—peeked down the stairs briefly, their faces alight with

pleasant surprise, but they vanished just as quickly when Seris shot them a meaningful glance.

Seris's movements were slow and calculated as she moved to a plush chair at the end of the pushed-together tables and eased into it with a groan. She waved for the rest of us to join her.

At the door, Ellie scratched Boo between his eyes and told him to wait outside.

I sat on Seris's left, while Caera took the chair to her right. Nervousness rolled off Ellie in waves as she sat stiffly next to me. Sylvie, on her other side, squeezed her forearm gently. Chul stood, leaning against an upright post with his arms crossed.

Cylrit appeared from behind the bar and set a plain glass full of golden liquid in front of Seris. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather go rest for a few hours—or days—before we—"

He quieted at a look from her. They said nothing more to each other, but Cylrit stayed beside her, one hand on the back of her chair, his expression hard enough to crack the inn's stone foundations.

Seris took a small drink, let out a deep, shaky breath, and set the glass back on the table.

"So, here I am," I said, deciding to speak first to break the tension. "You took a big risk, both in sending Caera to Dicathen and with this gambit in the Relictombs. I might not have come."

A nearly imperceptible frown creased the smooth skin between her brows. "I'll thank you, of all people, not to lecture me on taking risks, Arthur Leywin."

I raised my hands off the table in a gesture of warding. "Point taken. But really, Seris, what is all this about? Why did you send for me?"

"A moment," she said, sagging under the weight of her fatigue. "The others will be here soon, and I've only the strength to have this conversation once." She took another small sip of her drink, her attention lingering on

my sister. “Eleanor, yes? Uncommon talent and bravery run in your blood, I see.”

Ellie flushed and stared at her hands, which were clasped together on top of the table in front of her. “I don’t know about that, uh, Scythe Seris—”

“Please, call me Seris. My time as a Scythe and general of Alacrya is past, I think.” She gave me a rueful smile. “And this must be…Lady Sylvie Indrath. Cadell thought you’d succumbed to your wounds after the battle in Dicathen. ‘Like mother, like daughter,’ he’d said. A cold one, that Cadell. Colder now, of course.”

Sylvie raised her chin, her face framed by the two sets of horns. The gold of her eyes was molten even in the bright light of the inn’s interior. “You seem to be quite well informed, Lady Seris.”

Seris’s face darkened, her focus momentarily far away. “That has always been my strength, of course.” Her gaze lingered on Sylvie for a moment before drifting to Chul. “And who is this hulking figure behind you? To look at him, I would almost think…” Her eyes narrowed, and she inspected him more closely. “Of asuran lineage? Phoenix, even?”

Chul’s jaw hardened. “Did you have a great deal of experience with the members of my race locked in your master’s dungeons? How much of a hand did you have in their questioning and torture? Perhaps you were even there when my mother, the great Lady Dawn of the Asclepius clan, was butchered in her cell?”

Suppressing a groan, I leaned in. Although Chul’s standoffishness was justified, it didn’t serve us in the moment. “We’re all friends here, remember?”

Seris wasn’t put off by his attitude, however. In fact, she gave him a sad smile and some of the tension bled out of her. “Of course, I understand now. Forgive me. I was aware of your mother, even saw her briefly once or twice, but I never met her properly. Your people—the hidden followers of the Lost Prince—are a bit of a curiosity in Taegrin Caelum, almost mythical really.”

Her attention returned to me. “So, you really have been busy these last couple months, haven’t you?” Turning only her head, she met Caera’s eyes. “And what of you, then, hm? Off galivanting with Arthur on his adventures, heedless of—” She cut off suddenly as she *really* looked at Caera. “No, I can see that’s not the case.”

Caera chewed the inside of her cheek for a few long seconds before providing a brief explanation of her imprisonment, first at the gentle hands of the Dicathians, and then much less comfortable among the dragons.

“So, war with the dragons really has come,” Seris mused under her breath, staring down into the alcohol as if it were a crystal ball and she were trying to divine the meaning of these events.

Her reverie was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Snapping out of her thoughts, she forced a welcoming smile onto her tired face. “Well, it would appear they have started to arrive. Brace yourselves.”

The door opened and two familiar figures filed in: Corbett and Lenora Denoir.

Lady Lenora froze, staring at the horns atop Caera’s head, but only for a second. She quickly broke with decorum and hurried to Caera. Caught off guard, Caera didn’t even stand as Lenora leaned down over her, brushing a hand down her cheek and glancing from one bandaged wound to the next, looking increasingly pained.

“Oh, Caera, what’s happened to you?” she breathed. Her eyes jumped to the horns, then back to Caera’s bandages, and it wasn’t entirely clear which she was referencing.

I could sense Caera’s discomfort as she gazed up at her adoptive mother, jaw slack. “I’m fine,” she said belatedly.

Corbett passed the two women, sparing Caera only the briefest glance and instead approaching Seris. He bowed deeply, his eyes on the floor. She acknowledged him by name, and he stood and turned back to Caera. “Lauden said you were gravely wounded. I am…glad to see his estimation of your poor health was exaggerated.”

Caera hesitated, then muttered only, “Thanks.”

Unlike his wife, Corbett was staring unabashedly at the horns plainly visible on Caera’s head. “Scythe Seris was kind enough to inform us of your…situation, as well. And a good thing, too. I can’t pretend not to be shocked to see it, even though—”

The door opened again, revealing a man with well-trimmed blond hair and a bushy goatee.

Corbett cleared his throat. Lenora took the seat next to Caera, and he sat beside her.

“Highlord Frost,” Seris welcomed the man. “Please, take a seat.”

The man’s severe gray eyes lingered on me for several seconds before he entered the tavern. “So, the famed Ascender Grey has returned. Hopefully this means I haven’t doomed my blood to a slow death by starvation under this faux sky after all?”

Cylrit softly cleared his throat. When he spoke, his words were equally soft, but the sharp edge in them glinted like a razor. “Have a seat, Uriel.”

Highlord Frost hesitated only a second before taking the seat at the end of the table opposite Seris.

Next in was a younger man, dark-haired and barrel-chested, whom it took me a few moments to recognize. He stood in the doorway and stared at me, his eyes growing misty.

“Lord Umburter,” Seris announced.

Suddenly he was moving quickly around the table toward me. Ellie tensed, and I gathered aether into my fist, prepared to defend myself or her if necessary.

But he jerked to a stop several feet away from us, then went to a knee, tears dripping from his downturned eyes. “Lance Arthur Leywin. Th-thank you.”

I suddenly remembered him. He’d been one of the highbloods given authority over Xyrus. This man, along with most of the others, had been happy to let Augustine do all their talking—and threatening—for them.

Before I could say anything, he kept talking. “Even though you had every reason to kill me, you didn’t. And yet, here in Alacrya, my brother was slaughtered by one of our own retainers without hesitation. Th-that was everything I needed to understand about this war.” Swallowing heavily, he stood and took a seat halfway between Ellie and Uriel.

I watched the young man for several long moments, but he kept his eyes, now dry again, firmly forward. Then another individual entered, and she gave me pause.

It was the short horns sprouting from her forehead that caught me most clearly by surprise. Shiny blue-black hair was pulled into a tight tail over the horns, dark against her pale skin. Her wine-colored eyes settled immediately on Caera, and she let out a relieved breath. Seris announced her as “Matron Tremblay,” and she took a seat next to Corbett after spending several very long seconds ogling Caera’s horns.

Over the next several minutes, various highbloods, matrons, and high-ranking ascenders arrived in a steady stream to fill up our table. A few, like Sulla, stood to make room for those of a higher station than themselves. Some of the names I knew, but most meant nothing to me.

The last to enter was another surprise, as I once again saw Kayden of Highblood Aphelion limp through the door after it had closed.

Seris regarded the man with mild surprise. “Ah, Lord Aphelion. Welcome.”

Kayden waved with his signature brand of carelessness and headed straight for the bar, away from the tension building around the table.

The shrewd and perceptive gazes of the highbloods were glued to Seris and me, their anticipation palpable as they waited for us to speak.

Seris met my eye. I gave her a small nod. She cleared her throat. “Now that everyone is present, let us begin.”

12

THE MESSAGE

"THIS IS NOT THE VICTORIAD, and I am not introducing a contestant fighting to be a retainer, so I will skip over the flagrant compliments and unnecessary list of achievements." Seris paused for a moment, letting the collection of highbloods look around at each other suspiciously. "Although known in Alacrya as Grey, the truth is this: I introduce to you Arthur Leywin, Lance of the country of Elenoir on the continent of Dicathen."

The room didn't so much erupt into noise as it simmered, the highbloods' sense of decorum fracturing only enough to allow some suppressed exclamations and half-whispered exchanges between neighbors. The attitude was all over the place, with some people leaning back in their chairs wide-eyed and flabbergasted, while others wore smug looks like they'd just won a bet. The reaction from most, though, indicated that they'd at least suspected the possibility of my being Dicathian.

Kayden was sitting at the foot of the stairs across the room, a glass in his one remaining hand. Slowly, he looked up from the glass and stared at me, our eyes locking. "You've *got* to be shitting me," he burst out, then laughed long and loud, silencing everyone else. "So you were…at the academy… and the students…" Kayden broke into heedless chuckling again as the others looked at him with thinly veiled annoyance.

“So our savior is Dicathian,” one of the ascenders, a man named Djimon, said with a hint of disbelief.

Next to him, Sulla was shaking his head. “I heard the rumors, but…” He looked me hard in the eye for a long moment, then shifted to Seris, his expression weakening. “Scythe Seris…what’s all this really been for?”

Several other attendees echoed this question, some nodding along, a couple rapping their knuckles on the table to show their support.

“Enough,” Highlord Frost said. His voice wasn’t loud; there was no harsh command in his tone, and yet the word carried like the sound of distant thunder, quieting everyone else.

Seris looked around for a few seconds, taking the time to meet each highblood’s eye in turn. “The question isn’t what this was all for, because each of you know the answer already. We fight for ourselves and our bloods, to shape our world so it is fit for those of us with ‘lesser’ blood and not just the asura who have marked it and claimed it as theirs.”

She paused for a moment to let these words settle. “No, I’m certain each of you understands all too well why you’re here. And because of this, you also know that this is not a war between two continents. The Dicathians are as much the victims of the Vritra clan’s hubris and self-righteous apotheosis as we are. They are our allies in this struggle, not our enemies.”

“So, are you the leader of your continent?” Matron Tremblay, the Vritra-blooded woman with blue-black hair, asked me. “What gives you the right to treat with this body on Dicathen’s behalf?”

I returned her unflinching gaze. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“Then why exactly are you here?” Highlord Frost asked. “I’ve heard quite a lot about you from my granddaughter. And more still from my soldiers in Dicathen who were unfortunate enough to cross paths with you. A Dicathian who teaches our children and spares our soldiers? You’ll have to forgive me, Lord Leywin, if I don’t fully understand what connects you to Alacrya.”

Several of the others murmured their agreement.

I sensed Chul shift his stance behind me, his mana billowing as he instinctively called on it. Sylvie, feeling my attention on him, took a step back to whisper in his ear, urging him to be patient.

“My time as an ascender and professor wasn’t intentional,” I said after taking a moment to collect my thoughts. “I didn’t come here to spy on you, infiltrate your institutions, or harm you, but I did consider you my enemy. Seris—and Lady Caera of Highblood Denoir—had done their best to convince me otherwise, but it was your children—kids like Enola—that really showed me the truth. I have enemies on this continent, many of them, but not everyone.”

Uriel smiled, a calculating expression. “Forgive me, but that doesn’t really answer my question. Why are you here now?”

I nodded, appreciating the man’s attention to detail. “Seris helped me protect my people, and so, I am here now to help protect hers.”

The bald ascender named Anvald grunted. “Then why don’t you go through those portals and kill Dragoth and all his soldiers?”

“I could,” I admitted, “but more would replace them, and then even more after that. You and I both know Agrona doesn’t mind spending lives. Besides, you can’t survive in here forever. I don’t know what Seris has planned, but I doubt it includes hiding in the Relictombs until you’ve all starved to death.”

“No, it does not,” Seris cut in firmly. “But this does bring us a step closer to the question we’re actually here to discuss today. Which is, of course, what comes next.”

Corbett Denoir took his wife’s hand and exchanged a brief look with her. “I think that’s a question on all our minds, Scythe—Lady Seris. Many of us have sacrificed everything to get to this point. Each time it seemed as though our situation had become unnavigable, you have seen us through, but…” He paused, his gaze tracking across the table. When he resumed, he spoke very carefully. “I think it is well past time that we have some understanding of the goal in all this. Not grand designs of self-governance and the ousting of the Vritra, but real, tangible results. Even if we understand why Grey would help us, I, at least, do not see *how*.”

Adaenn of Highblood Umburter, the young man I'd spared at Xyrus, sputtered indignantly. "Did you not see what he did at the Victoriad? I wasn't even there, and still I've heard it recounted dozens of times. He single-handedly retook the Dicathian cities of Vildorial, Blackbend, Xyrus, and Etistin, defeating entire *armies*. Even the Scythes, I'm told, bowed before his superior might."

I cleared my throat and gestured for Adaenn to settle down.

"But it wasn't just Scythes," Caera said unexpectedly.

The room's attention sharpened. They all knew Caera had been traveling with me, and from the change in atmosphere, it was obvious they had been waiting for her to speak. Additionally, her horns, now proudly displayed without her pendant, had quickly drawn the attention of nearly everyone present. When she spoke, it was like she gave them permission to stare.

She raised her chin and sat a little straighter. "The High Sovereign sent a battle group of Wraiths to track down Arthur in Dicathen. He killed them all."

Kayden whistled. Matron Tremblay frowned down at her hands.

"The Wraiths…I thought they were a myth." Sulla rubbed a hand down his face. Shaken, he glanced in my direction. "And you…?"

An older woman, who had been introduced as Matron Amelie of Highblood Bellerose, scoffed. "Fantastical poppycock. Lady Seris, surely you haven't brought us here only to insult us with bedtime tales."

Cylrit went rigid, but Seris remained passive as she said, "Matron Bellerose, perhaps my current weakened state has given you the wrong impression. I am not, in fact, so weary yet that I will accept being spoken to in such a manner."

Matron Bellerose paled, folding her hands in her lap and looking just past Seris to avoid meeting her eye. "I apologize, Lady Seris. You are right, of course. My tone was unbecoming of my station. Forgive me."

Seris inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement. "I do not blame you for your skepticism, which is healthy, but it is equally true that none of you

would be here if you didn’t have the capacity to see beyond the rigid structure of our society and culture. The Wraiths are quite real, and what Lady Caera has said is true. I tell you this to reinforce one essential point: Arthur has the strength to help us break free of this prison we’ve built around ourselves.”

The room was silent for a long moment after this statement. I caught Highlords Frost and Ainsworth sharing an uncertain look. Matron Tremblay’s eyes never left me, while Kayden seemed lost in thought as he swirled his drink. The others all displayed some similar combination of outward expressions, but no one voiced their thoughts.

‘This isn’t what they were expecting.’ There was a tense edge to Sylvie’s thoughts. *‘They’re terrified.’*

They have relied on Seris for all their hope of change throughout this uprising, I sent back, allowing the silence to linger. *To be told that she, in turn, is relying on someone else—and an outsider—will be difficult for some of them to accept.*

“And so we move on to our next steps,” Seris continued after a long pause. “We have in Arthur an ally capable of striking Agrona’s forces in a way no one else can. In order to build public support, it is essential that we continue to erode the people’s faith in Agrona’s divine infallibility. My publicized execution of Sovereign Orlaeth was the first step. By showing this continent that the asura aren’t in fact immortal, we also reveal to them a potential future where the asura are gone entirely. But one quickly projected image isn’t enough. No, we need a decisive victory, and in plain view.”

“You mean to send Arthur after the Sovereigns,” Sylvie said, moving to stand behind me once again, her hands on the back of my chair.

“Yes!” Chul burst out, making everyone jump. He thrust his fist in the air and grinned. “It is about time.”

Next to me, Ellie let out a deep breath, trying to relax from the fright Chul had given her. “Fighting asuras…” she whispered, picking at the edge of the table nervously.

“I was expecting more than a show of force,” Highlord Ainsworth noted as he stroked his goatee.

Lord Lars Isenhaert, a wiry blond man with a drooping mustache, slapped his palm on the table. “Indeed. My thoughts exactly, Ector.”

Seris regarded them both dispassionately. “Destroying the Sovereigns may not weaken Agrona’s power, but it will weaken his image with the public. And, more importantly, such a bold strike against him will draw his greatest weapon into the field.” Seris was facing the highbloods as she spoke, but I knew she was speaking directly to me as she said, “His entire mind has been consumed with the Legacy for decades. Its removal is now our highest priority.”

My fists clenched and my jaw tightened. Despite these physical reactions, though, I wasn’t really sure what I was feeling.

One of the highbloods spoke, asked a question, but my thoughts were plunging inward, and I didn’t process the words.

Tessia…

‘She’s right, Arthur,’ Sylvie said, projecting her thoughts into mine. *‘I’m sorry, but you’ve been putting this off for too long. Cecilia needs to be dealt with.’*

But how do we do that?

“Why let the girl live long enough to grow into a threat, then?”

Uriel’s words took a moment to sink in, but once they did, I forced my mind back to the conversation happening around me.

“It would have been more prudent, it seems, to kill her months ago, even if that would have meant losing the opportunity for our current act of rebellion,” Corbett added, speaking carefully.

Seris’s dark eyes flicked to me for half a heartbeat before she responded. “Perhaps, but there were many reasons not to as well, not least of which was my own curiosity. I had to know if this power was real and what it was

capable of. Additionally, the vessel in which the Legacy resides is the princess of Elenoir, Tessia Eralith. I was not ready to consign her to death."

"But you are now?" I asked, trying to sound curious and nonchalant. The words came out hollow.

She tilted her head slightly to the side, regarding me intently. "The Legacy needs to be removed from this war. Her control over mana has grown to be absolute, and I believe you are the only one capable of facing her head-on."

Before I could respond, Ellie leaned forward on her elbows and stared hard at Seris. "We're not going to kill Tessia."

I felt the bittersweet sting of pride and regret as I looked at Ellie's fierce expression.

Seris leaned back in her chair, unphased. "I haven't asked for your presence to tell you what to do. This isn't an order, but a plea. We lack the strength, either in magic or numbers, to defeat Agrona. From the beginning, this has been about eroding the base of his power. Sehz-Clar, Orlaeth, the Relictombs—each a new crack in that foundation. Without working together, however, neither of us can topple him entirely."

I knew there was another layer to Seris's plans. Lyra had told me that Seris's rebellion was, in part, to keep Agrona occupied while I fought to retake my continent. She would lose face with her followers if she said it out loud here, but I couldn't ignore that our success had been, at least in part, at the cost of her people.

Maylis stood, her hands woven into her hair behind her head as she faced away from the table. "But even weakening his foundations, Agrona is too powerful to attack directly." She spun around, her hands lowering and curling into fists. "I'm sorry, but I don't see how one Dicathian can match him."

"Take your seat," Seris said with the command of one who knows she'll be obeyed.

Maylis bit her lip and did as she'd been told.

Addressing the table at large, Seris said, “As Matron Tremblay has noted, even with his hold over this continent weakened, Agrona is not someone anyone in this world can defeat. But my goal has never been to engage with him directly.” Seris’s dark eyes swept across the highbloods. “The way to Epheotus is finally open, and dragons have arrived in Dicathen. My plan is and has always been to simply set the playing field properly so that when Agrona and Kezess eventually battle, the outcome can only be their mutual destruction.”

The room was utterly silent at this proclamation. Only Kayden wasn’t openly staring at Seris, instead gazing gloomily into his drink.

“You are wrong,” Chul said, his deep voice shattering the silence like glass.

Seris’s frown was almost cartoonishly amusing as she regarded my half-asuran companion, clearly at a loss for words.

“Agrona can be defeated by someone in this world. My brother in vengeance and I will prove it when the coward basilisk finally leaves his hole in the mountains.”

“I need time to think about this,” I said, pushing away from the table and standing before the conversation devolved further. Ellie quickly followed my example.

After several seconds, Seris dragged her focus away from Chul and back to me. It was a testament to her fatigue that she didn’t stand. “I have a number of other things to discuss with my council. You will find plenty of room upstairs to accommodate your party, and my staff will bring you anything you need.”

I nodded and started to turn away.

“But Arthur,” Seris said, her tone taking on a new urgency, “time is only one of many resources that we are lacking.”

I only nodded again before circling around the table and heading for the stairs, the watchful eyes of the many Alacryan highbloods burning into my back.

Kayden moved out of the way, listing slightly as he kept the weight off his bad leg. “A Dicathian. It’s strange, Grey. I should hate you, but the whole reason I liked you is that you seemed immune to the blood mania of our culture. And now I know why.” He held out his hand, and I took it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Arthur Leywin.”

“I’m surprised to see you here,” I admitted, my gaze inadvertently traveling past him to the stairs, which I longed to ascend. “It seemed like you’d had enough of war.”

His smile faltered, and he bit his top lip, frowning. “I’m not much good in a fight nowadays, but my blood has resources that are useful to Seris. After what I saw at the Victoriad…” He searched my eyes for a long moment. “I knew things weren’t ever going to be the same, and I knew which side I wanted to be on.”

Unsure what else to say, I clapped him on the shoulder and headed up the stairs, my mind full of a thousand possible outcomes to a confrontation with Cecilia, all of them negative. A servant met us at the top of the stairs and showed us to a row of comfortable rooms. Everyone piled into the first behind me.

“This is a good plan,” Chul said as the door closed behind us. He stretched his shoulders and let out a deep breath. “I like this plan.”

I threw myself into a plush chair in the corner and ran my hands through my hair, looking up at Sylvie with growing desperation. *I’m not ready to face this.*

She sat on the bed, looking out of place. The relic armor was now largely obscured beneath a set of flowing jet-black robes made of tiny interlocking scales, but that didn’t hide the fierce half-helm or the second set of horns following the line of her jaw. *‘Have we ever been ready for the things this life has thrown at us?’*

I closed my eyes and let my head loll back, frustrated with myself.

From across the zone, Regis’s voice jumped into my thoughts. *‘Should you have seen this coming? Yes. Should you have spent more than a passing mental nod here and there considering how to reverse whatever Agrona did*

to your waifu? Also yes. Haven't we always basically just pulled the solution out of our collective butts when faced with seemingly impossible situations? Yet again, yes.'

Ellie moved to sit next to Sylvie, resting her head on my bond's shoulder. Sylvie took Ellie's hand—the one not attached to a broken arm—in her own and gave it a familial squeeze.

"We know Tessia's mind is still in her body," I said aloud for Ellie and Chul's benefit. "Maybe Aroa's Requiem could be used to remove Cecilia…"

"Perhaps," Sylvie said, her eyes downcast. "But your insight into that power is incomplete, you said. And, being an aevum technique, you are not naturally aligned to it. I don't want to—"

"But maybe you could use it," I said, seizing on a sudden idea. "If you could take the rune from me like Regis did with Destruction, perhaps you could make full use of it."

She looked up apologetically. "But how would we do that, Arthur? Regis was a part of you, capable of manifesting within your body and transferring the rune while it was still forming…"

Chul's face was marred by a deep frown. "If this Legacy is such a threat, would it not be safer just to kill her?"

Ellie jumped to her feet and rounded on Chul, pointing her finger like a dagger. "What is it with you and your incessant need to fight and kill? There are other factors to weigh, and not everything can be solved by smashing it."

"But this can," Chul answered with a shrug.

Groaning, Ellie threw herself back down on the bed.

"We'll find a—" I bit the words off, unable to finish the sentence. No matter how much I wanted to reassure Ellie, I couldn't bring myself to give her that kind of hope.

‘Why not take her to Mordain?’ Regis suggested. *‘He's a bit of a hippy, but he's also one of the oldest and most secretive asura that we know.’*

I felt my brows knit together. “That's…actually not a terrible idea.”

“Wait, was that Regis?” Ellie asked, sitting up again. “What did he say?”

Sylvie quickly explained the suggestion.

“This, too, is a good plan,” Chul agreed. “Mordain has great insight into matters of reincarnation, and he worked beside djinn like my father for many years. Then, if there is no solution, we can still kill her.”

“We shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves. Even assuming we’re able to defeat the Sovereign, we really don’t know what we’ll be walking into regarding a fight with Cecilia.” I shifted uncomfortably in the cushioned chair. “But one way to figure it out is to face her directly.”

“Yes,” Chul said, hammering his clenched fist into his chest. “The best way to understand someone is to fight them.”

“We shouldn’t be so set on fighting her,” Sylvie countered. “What reason does Cecilia have to fight for Agrona, really? Maybe we can talk to her, convince her to leave him. Honestly, we’re more likely to want to help her than he is. There is no way he’s not using her talents as the Legacy for something awful.”

Ellie wrapped Sylvie up in a big hug, squeezing her. “I’m…not going to go with you this time, am I?”

Looking at my sister’s bandaged wounds, I felt some of the tension ease from me, realizing I’d already made up my mind on this topic. “To fight an asura and the Legacy? No, sis, sorry. You’re going to stay here with Regis and heal up.”

‘You really want to go into this fight without the Destruction rune?’ he asked from his jarred head.

I pictured the Wraiths being unmade one by one at my hand, Destruction devouring my enemies and myself side by side. I didn’t let the thought leak through to Regis, but it was actually a relief to be leaving the Destruction

godrune behind. It was too great a temptation, and only increased the likelihood of something happening to Tessia during the battle.

They need you here for now, I sent back, pouring my appreciation for his efforts into the thought. *We'll figure out how to get you out of that jar when I get back.*

Regis and the others were all quiet, which suited my stirring thoughts just fine.

Despite what I'd said, I wasn't sure that trying to capture Cecilia and take her to Mordain was the best option. My fear was that, rather, it was a selfish one. If she was so dangerous, could I in good conscience bring her into the phoenixes' home? It wasn't entirely unlike carrying around an unstable explosive and hoping it didn't go off and hurt someone.

But the other option was just as unacceptable.

Was I wrong not to kill her at the Victoriad? I asked myself, careful to keep my thoughts from Sylvie and Regis.

I would have to deal with Nico either way. Thinking back to the pure hatred he had exhibited when we'd fought, when I learned who Elijah had really been the entire time I'd known him, I couldn't imagine not having to kill him to get to her. *But he took Tessia*, I reminded myself, trying to conjure up my rage toward Nico, but it had long since gone cold in my guts.

I couldn't hate either of them, not the way they hated me. It was too complicated.

A vision of Virion's face twisted with hatred and despair popped up in my mind's eye. *Could he ever forgive me if I killed his granddaughter, no matter the reason?*

Could I ever forgive myself?

A mana signature broke away from those gathered in the tavern below and ascended the stairs. I could immediately tell it was Caera. The lull in our conversation lasted until she reached the outside of our door, where she hesitated a moment before knocking lightly.

I rose and crossed to the door, opening it and standing aside. Her eyes tracked across my face before settling on the others behind me. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t sure where I’d be needed most, but the conversation downstairs has devolved into arguments about provisions and the division of each blood's stores, so…”

I waved her in, then focused on the others. “Pick a room and try to get some rest.”

Sylvie stood, pulling Ellie up with her. “Bunk with me?” she asked, her arm around Ellie’s shoulder.

“Actually, Lady Sylvie, I was hoping to speak with you as well as Arthur,” Caera said, looking down and tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Sylvie’s brows rose, but she recovered quickly, releasing my sister and easing back into her seat. “Of course.”

Ellie high-fived Caera on her way past. “I’m going to sleep for like a whole week, I swear.”

“I do not need sleep,” Chul said as he reached the door in Ellie’s wake, not looking at me. “I think I will explore this place.”

“That’s probably not a”—the door closed behind him—“good idea…”

Caera settled into the chair I’d vacated. “Vritra’s horns, but it’s been a long day…days? I pity anyone who gets stuck in a convergence zone with you three. Ascenders will die by the dozens.” She blanched, sitting up straight and correcting her posture. “My apologies, I don’t mean…”

I gave her a wry smile. “I haven’t seen you this stressed in a while. I think you were more relaxed coming out of Vajrakor’s prison. This highblood lifestyle really doesn’t suit you.”

Caera straightened her clothes. The effect was minimal considering all the bloodstains, tears, and bandages. “It never really has.”

“What do you need to tell us?” Sylvie asked, a hint of a frown creasing her brows. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, thank you. This…will be easier to show you, I think.”

Caera undid the laces of her left boot and pulled it off, then the bloody sock beneath it. She fiddled with something around her pinky toe, struggling with it momentarily before it slid free. In her hand was a thin, plain ring with a subtle aura of mana around it.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “You managed to keep a dimension ring hidden from everyone in Vildorial.”

“Like that old cloak of yours, it is runed so that a casual look will slip right past it. No one inspected me close enough to discover it, thankfully. They’d already found my normal dimension ring, after all.” She rotated her wrist, letting the plain band catch the light so I could just see the markings etched into its surface. “Quite expensive, actually, especially considering the size of the extradimensional space contained within.”

“And what is stored inside that space?” Sylvie asked, her eyes never leaving the ring.

“Just one thing.” Caera swallowed hard, then channeled mana into the artifact. “It’s a message. From Scythe Nico. He said—well, he said to tell you that you have to save her. That you…owe her a life.”

A rough sphere appeared in her other hand. It was white, and too large for her to comfortably hold in one hand. The outer shell was very slightly transparent, revealing a hint of purple within. My heart began to beat rapidly at the sight of it, and my throat went dry.

It was a dragon’s core. Sylvia’s core.

I carefully accepted it from Caera, holding it as if it were made of brittle glass. It was empty, nothing more than a relic full of painful memories. Nico must have known that, and yet he had risked sending it anyway, and with that message…

No, it wasn’t just an empty organ. It did bring with it painful memories, but also, it brought hope.

13

A SNAPPED THREAD

CECILIA

Voices above, around. Familiar, but far away. So, so far away…

The words, talking about the flames in my flesh, dancing like sprites. Swirling, eager mana, burning, burning. Too much. More and more, drawn to me, flames to the moth. Filling me. My blood, my bones.

Mine.

Mine, like the hole. Deep and endless. A frost-filled pit. Can't remember… *what was there before? In the hole?*

Magic. Mana. A key. *A core*.

The words again. Strange voices, and familiar ones. "Delirium." "Fever." "Danger." "Time."

Time. A snapped thread, frayed, incoherent.

Light, dark, light, dark…dark…

Eyes open. A darkness full of color. Red, yellow, green, blue…mana.

Figures looming. Needles in my flesh, metal pressed against my skin. More words. "Delay." "Will." "Soul." "Healing." "Integration." "

Darkness again.

I woke up trembling. The echo of a scream ringing in my ears, heart racing, bursting. Terrified.

There were stars. Outside my windows. The purple silhouette of mountains. Their name escaped me. Something was wrong. With my mind, with my magic.

I closed my eyes, tried to think. It hurt. *I* hurt. My skin was burning. Muscles ached. Every breath was full of ragged pain. Pain and…mana. Every breath was full of mana. Not flowing into my core but…into me.

Calm down. The mana was there. The *magic* was there.

Wind blew through me, cooling my bones. Sleep slipped back over me.

I blinked awake again, an unknown presence filling my rooms. At the foot of the bed, a man stood. Like Agrona, but also nothing like Agrona. His eyes, two bright rubies, pierced me like blood-tipped spears. I shivered, feeling his gaze on my skin, *under* my skin, peeling me apart layer by layer.

He had a cold, gray face, impassive around his cutting eyes. Two horns corkscrewed up from the top of his head. I knew that face, I thought. Only…

He said something, and someone else moved into view, his own presence dwarfing the first man. Agrona. He smiled down at me, and spoke kind words.

Sovereign Oludari Vritra of Truacia.

Names and places, the meanings of which I couldn’t seem to capture.

Oludari replied, concerned.

Agrona brushed the concerns aside, confident, assuring. *Daunting*.

Oludari, unassuaged. Agrona, commanding. Oludari, subservient. He cast an uneasy glance at me, and my spirit shriveled. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe.

When I opened them again, I was alone. Time felt more tangible…more real. I could tell that several hours had passed.

I struggled to think back to Agrona's conversation with Oludari, but it was like trying to remember a dream after waking. The more I clung to the memory, the more it slipped through my grasp.

My fever had broken. *How long has it been?* I wondered. Weeks, I suspected.

'Long enough that I wasn't sure we were going to survive after all,' Tessia said in my mind. *'Integration…I never could have imagined experiencing it myself. How would everyone rea—'*

I groaned and rolled over, pulling one of the sweat-stained pillows over my head. *Leave me alone.*

There was no reply.

After a few minutes, I pushed away the pillow and kicked my legs over the edge of the bed. The floor was cold against my hot skin, and when I stood, my legs shook violently. I stumbled to the balcony door, which was open, and leaned against the railing. The wind off the mountains was bitter cold, conjuring gooseflesh all over my body and making it shake even worse.

Mana flowed to my limbs, and the shaking eased. It filled my lungs, helping me to breathe deeply. It sparked within my mind, clearing my thoughts.

Before, I'd felt like I was at one with the mana. It listened to me, reacted to my thoughts and desires, a tool I could do anything with. I should be stronger now, but…

There was this inescapable sense of irony. I couldn't remember feeling weaker and less myself since being reincarnated into this world. I was the Legacy, and now I'd gone through Integration, making me perhaps the most powerful mage in the world. But I couldn't stop my knees from shaking or the sweat from beading on my brow. Every breath felt like I was forcing it into my lungs, like the next time I tried to breathe I might not be able to.

Agrona had told me I was past the worst of it, but it didn't feel that way. Whatever had happened to me while I was unconscious, right after my

Integration, I couldn’t see how it was worse than these weeks of healing and sickness.

There was a frightening sense of incorrectness to it. Kind of like when I’d had a huge ki center but hadn’t been able to stop it from surging out of me and hurting Nico—*and Grey*.

Leaning forward, I was sick over the balcony's edge. I propped myself up on the cold railing, tasting the bitterness of my own bile on my teeth and losing myself for a while. Then, slowly, I stumbled back to my bed and fell in it, but sleep was distant and unreachable.

I just lay there, able to do nothing but drag the spotlight of my attention across the internal workings of this fragile elven body. It was still in the final stages of acclimating to the mana, now infusing every cell. It was a strange sensation to have mana that was not constrained by a core. I really was *one* with mana. That’s what Integration was. Agrona had tried to describe it, but what he’d told me couldn’t match with reality. Maybe his asuran mind couldn’t even conceive of what Integration really meant. But then, I thought, no one who hadn’t experienced this sense of balance and power could hope to understand it.

Tentatively, I began to experiment with it, sensing the flow of mana around and through me. Water-attribute mana soothed my aching muscles while wind-attribute mana cooled my skin. Earth-attribute mana hardened in my bones and fire-attribute mana warmed my blood.

This detached kind of observation helped bring some clarity. Integration, I realized, was actually a lot like awakening to mana after spending my entire former life trying to control ki.

In the same way that mana had felt so much more complete and magical, Integration felt exponentially more potent than relying on a core to use magic. The creation of a mana core was similar to the condensing of a ki center since each required the concentration of energy to form, with the sensation of mana filling and flowing freely through my body very similar to ki manipulation on Earth.

I felt myself shrink back from this thought, still afraid that my mana—like with ki—would surge beyond my control. Without a core to control it…

I sat up and pushed my back against the headboard, slowing my breathing. Being the Legacy hadn't stopped that from happening before, on Earth. *I'm in control*, I assured myself, repeating it over and over again like a mantra.

Eventually, sleep crept up on me, and I drowsed.

I woke screaming, and an echoing scream came back to me.

Bolting up from my bed, I stared wide-eyed at the startled attendant who had been cleaning my chambers. Nico was sitting at my bedside, and he quickly dismissed the attendant, who bowed and rushed from the room with a frightened backward glance at me.

"What is it?" Nico asked, his voice soft. It almost sounded like his old voice, his real voice, the way he'd sounded back on Earth.

I looked at him more closely. Not his dark hair and sharp features. No, his Alacryan face wasn't *his* anymore than Tessia Eralith's thin elven face was mine. But the way he dug his nails into his palm, the way he tried not to show it when he was biting the inside of his lip, how he leaned toward me ever so slightly, like he wanted to be just that little bit closer to me…in those moments, I could see him. And when I closed my eyes, I could picture him so clearly.

I tensed suddenly as Tessia's voice entered my mind.

'Show him the mana, from before.'

I knew what she was talking about immediately: the mana I had taken from Agrona's rune-covered table, the one I'd woken up on after my Integration. It had stayed within me, still carrying the shape and purpose it had been given by the strange runes.

'Remember, Cecilia. You felt like something was wrong when you first woke up. There is more to all this than what you're being told.'

I didn't acknowledge her, but she was right. I had woken up on that table feeling weak but myself, only to sink back into sickness the very same night. Half-remembered words tumbled in the back of my head, out of reach.

Haltingly, I began to explain to Nico what I'd seen and done upon first waking, and the discomfort I'd felt at being surrounded by the strange mages.

"You did…what? That doesn't make sense, Cecil." He gave me a pitying look. "It's not…well, possible."

I held out my hand, palm up. Warm light issued from my skin as a wisp of mana appeared in the air, burning in the shape of the runes that had originally given it form.

Nico's eyes widened and his breathing became shallow. He leaned forward, peering at the mana, his struggle to understand and accept it clearly written across his face.

I told him about the runes, and what I wanted to do.

Moving gingerly, Nico pressed the tip of his finger down into the mana. It condensed into a swarm of individual particles and was pulled into his body. I held my focus around it, allowing the spell to keep its form instead of being dissolved into the individual components of its mana. Nico's eyes closed, jumping around beneath his lids.

"It's…I'm not sure." Nico's words rolled out of him in a slow drawl as he focused on the spell. I felt him channeling mana into his regalia. "The structure, the runes—the magic. It's not like anything I've ever seen, but…" His eyes opened, and he stared at me. His fear was obvious. "This is going to take some time. We…shouldn't tell anyone else about this."

I agreed completely.

Nico hesitated, clearly thinking hard about something, then added, "Except…Draneeve, maybe. Only if completely necessary. We can trust him, because—well, just know that we can trust him. I've had him keeping an eye on you whenever I couldn't."

Despite not really understanding, I acknowledged what he said.

After that, Nico came to my rooms as often as was prudent. Slowly, more of my time was spent awake than asleep, but the experience of Integration left behind a deep-rooted fatigue that kept me in my chambers.

Nico was restless when presented with a problem, a puzzle to be solved, a knot to be undone. His mind could focus on nothing else, and even when he couldn't be with me—my presence was required to hold the shape of the mana—he thought about it ceaselessly.

I could tell something was bothering him, but he was hiding his fears from me. In all this time together, I hadn't wanted to derail his thoughts and so hadn't gone into more detail about the return of my old memories…but no, really, that was just an excuse. I was afraid. Afraid of what I might hear after confessing. What would that conversation lead to? I wasn't ready to tell him that I had killed myself and let Grey take the blame.

Whenever someone knocked on my door, I expected it to be Nico. I was surprised, then, the day that Melzri strode in. She wrinkled her nose as she looked around my room, not hiding her distaste. "Hello, Legacy. I've been tasked with fetching you for some training. I'm sure you're just as excited about the prospect as I am."

Ignoring her sarcasm, I stood and gestured wordlessly for her to lead the way. We were quiet as we passed through the halls of Taegrin Caelum, and I couldn't shake the feeling of scurrying like a mouse in her wake. I hated feeling so vulnerable.

Melzri's long, bright-white braid bounced with each step. The way her horns curled back over her head, they were pointing at me like spears. We'd never gotten along, but I couldn't help but admire her obvious self-confidence, the way she was entirely at ease in her own skin. I thought about trying to make small talk to break the awkward silence between us but didn't know where to begin.

She was a Scythe, and all of Alacrya knew her story. When her blood manifested, the resulting conflux of mana killed her highblood foster siblings. Her foster father—the man who had raised her for twelve years—flew into a rage and tried to kill her. Defending herself, she burned the heart out of his chest. After that, she was taken in by Agrona and raised within this very fortress.

It was probably why she'd become so bitter toward me. After all, she'd been like a daughter to Agrona before I arrived. In some way, I was certain

she thought that I'd supplanted her.

And I suppose, really, I had. That didn't make me feel bad for her or anything. In fact, as I considered the situation, I felt more and more strongly that she'd gotten exactly what she deserved. Melzri and the rest of the Scythes were self-important, cruel people. They'd been awful to Nico. Suddenly that self-confidence I had admired only seconds earlier seemed unearned.

I clenched my jaw and walked in silence.

We ended up in a long hall deep in the stone at the base of Taegrin Caelum. The bare walls and floor were cracked and blackened with scorch marks from the many powerful mages—retainers, Scythes, even Wraiths—who had trained here over the decades. There was no equipment or weaponry, nothing to help with training. Anyone strong enough to be brought here didn't need things like that.

I was unsurprised to find Scythe Viessa already there, along with Draneeve and a handful of nameless mages I didn't recognize. Of those present, Viessa had the strongest mana signature, then Melzri. Draneeve was a distant third. The others were all mediocre mages at best. I could only assume they were researchers or scientists, not warriors.

Melzri stopped beside Viessa, glowering at me. Viessa's porcelain skin was washed out in the dim light, her purple hair dark and her void-black eyes even darker.

She would have been terrifying, except…

I looked down at my own hand, rubbing my fingers together. I could see the mana in each of them, watch it churning in their core as it was purified, and knew better than they did themselves just how strong, or weak, they really were. I could break these Scythes with a snap of my fingers. If I wanted to.

Draneeve bobbed forward, his expression hidden behind his awful mask. "Ah, Lady Cecilia. Lord Agrona sends his regrets that he can't join us at the moment. But he hopes Scythes Melzri and Viessa will…" He trailed off, his eyes jumping to the Scythes behind the mask. He cleared his throat, then finished, "That they will make suitable partners for your training today."

Viessa hissed under her breath. “We should be helping Dragoth dig out the traitor, not babysitting this reincarnate child.”

Melzri only rolled her shoulders and grinned. “Now, sister, don’t be like that. The Legacy needs all the help she can get. Despite everything the High Sovereign has done to get her to this point, she hasn’t had so much as one real victory for him.”

Viessa scowled, circling around me and away from Melzri so the two were flanking me. “Your mana signature doesn’t seem as strong as before, girl. Without a core, you seem…deflated.”

All my self-doubt and anxiety melted away in the face of their taunting. These two were nothing to me. I sure as hell wasn’t intimidated by their desperate jabs.

Draneeve had taken several steps back, and the other mages followed his example. “Lady Cecilia is to test her powers. You two should—”

Viessa thrust her hands forward. Dark mana coalesced around them, spilling out like a swarm of locusts.

And then vanishing.

She stared at her hands, disbelieving, and thrust them forward a second time. Nothing happened. The mana didn’t respond to her at all.

Melzri summoned her blade, which burst into black flames, and lunged at me. The flames snuffed out halfway, and her blade grew so heavy that she stumbled before it was ripped from her fingers, striking the floor hard enough to crack stone.

“Stop this at once,” Viessa breathed, the mana in her core seething as it flowed out through her channels and veins. But she couldn’t form it into a spell.

Melzri balled her fists. “What are you doing?”

I felt myself smile. It was cold and cruel, the kind of expression that would have frightened me if I’d seen it on another face. And then I told her. I explained what I was doing…and what I was going to do.

It was not without a sense of self-satisfaction that I watched them struggle to understand, but it wasn't until both fully realized the situation that I knew I had the stomach for what was to come.

Closing my eyes, I took control of all the mana Viessa had just released and turned it back on her, driving it into her veins, scouring her channels and bombarding her core. I heard her knees strike the stone as a choked scream echoed through the combat hall.

"You bitch—"

Melzri's voice cut off with a gust as her body slammed into the ground, the force of gravity so great I knew her bones were crushing the meat of her body.

There was no difference between the mana in my body and that in theirs, or in the atmosphere around us. As the Legacy, my ability to control mana was unparalleled. And now that I had Integrated, I no longer required my mana to be drawn into a core, purified, and released before being manipulated. From this new perspective, even the idea of purified mana seemed inconsequential. I didn't need to wash the mana and make it mine in order to control it.

I already controlled it all.

The Scythes were helpless against me. Even these shadowy Wraiths I'd heard about would be hopeless against me. What good was an asura's strength in magic if I could wipe away their spells before they formed, pull their bodies apart from the inside with their own power, starve them of what made them special. Even Agrona wasn't a threat to me.

'Which is why he's encouraged you to be so subservient,' Tessia's annoying voice suddenly chimed in, interrupting my thoughts. *'He knew what you'd become, or hoped at least, and he doesn't allow anyone else to be truly powerful. So he taught you to be obedient.'*

I clamped down on my mana, attempting again to smother Tessia's voice. But I couldn't. It was the one thing I couldn't control.

"Um, Lady Cecilia, perhaps…" Draneeve's simpering voice trailed off suggestively.

I opened my eyes and looked down at the two Scythes, one writhing in pain to my left, the other flattened against the stone to my right. I released the pressure of the mana ripping at Viessa's insides and the gravity crushing Melzri, but I kept their mana in check, preventing either of them from casting a spell in retaliation.

Tessia kept talking. *'He's got this promise to send you back to Earth hanging over your head, and Nico to threaten if you ever get out of line. He doesn't care about you or love you. He probably doesn't even intend to let you control this power. Why would he when he can just override your mind?'*

I pushed her voice away. Although she could interrupt my thoughts, she couldn't affect my actions or words.

Floating off the ground, I brushed aside a lock of silver hair. "Get up, you two. I want to understand just how far my control goes."

The sky above Taegrin Caelum was heavy with dark clouds. I flew through them like a bird, enjoying the sensation of all that mana condensing around me, drawn to the natural storm. Turning upward, I shot through the cold air, moisture collecting against my skin, until I burst into clear sky.

Below me, clouds rolled away as far as the eye could see in every direction.

I liked it up there. It was peaceful. Separate. Training with my new powers was more like exploration—seeing what my limits were. I didn't have to learn through repetition, only to think with a clear enough vision, and keeping a clear head was a lot easier to do in the open air than buried beneath the fortress.

The clouds began to swirl in playful patterns. Steam rose up from them, condensing into spheres of water that floated around and caught the light. The clouds lightened from a deep gray to soft, fluffy white. Descending, I lay atop the clouds, resting my head on my hands and crossing my ankles as I stared up at the blue expanse above.

“Tessia,” I said, my voice floating away on the gentle breeze.

No response came.

Tessia, I thought sharply, unable to suppress my irritation at having to call for her twice.

‘This power play doesn’t suit either of us,’ she answered after a few seconds. *‘We both know the only reason you’re calling for me is because it gives you a false sense of control. You’ve done it, you’ve achieved Integration, you’ve tossed the Scythes around like ragdolls, yet you can’t do anything about me, and that eats away at you.’*

I closed my eyes, rolled over, and sank into the clouds. I held a picture in my mind, reaching with tendrils of mana all throughout my body, searching. I wasn’t sure if it was working—if it even could work—but when I opened my eyes, I couldn’t help but smile.

I was no longer surrounded by cool wind and fluffy clouds, but was standing on soft green grass beneath the spreading limbs of tall, silver-barked trees, their shadows dappling the ground and making the entire world look like it was swaying gently.

Tessia Eralith was standing not far away. Her silvery braid hung over her bare shoulder, an emerald green and gold gown draped over her lithe frame.

I looked down at myself. I was shorter than her, a bit stockier. My hair was plain brown and boring, chopped off around my shoulders like it’d been hacked apart with shears.

I let out a deep breath to steady myself. “I hate talking to you in my head. It’s gross…like a violation. This is better.”

“A violation…yeah, I think I know exactly what you mean,” Tessia said, her undertone of sadness cut through with a vague sense of irritation. “You know, after I learned through you that Arthur was reincarnated, so much made sense. His intellect, his wisdom, his maturity. It seems foolish, now that I think about it, that I tried so hard to chase after him. I used to get really angry at myself about how different we were when I thought I was a year older…but it turns out he was thirty years older.”

She laughed, and I scowled.

“Why should I care?”

“Because I thought you’d be the same, that you’d be…different. I was confused at first. But then I realized—”

“Yeah, you’ve said all this before.”

“So, are you ready to listen?”

I kept careful watch on the elderwood guardian, which was writhing around the outskirts of the clearing I had created for our conversation. “You can see in my head, can’t you? My every thought and desire is an open book to you. So you tell me.”

Tessia caressed the hair hanging over her shoulder, her eyes on the ground. “It’s not about you talking to me. It’s about you being honest with yourself. After everything you’ve learned, you’re still fighting this war. Why help Agrona get what he wants? Do you really trust him to send you back to your old life after all this?” She looked up, her gaze burning into mine. “And is it really worth it?”

I rubbed my eyes in frustration, turning my back on her. “What do you want me to say? I’m selfish? A shitty person? A stunted child believing in fairy stories? Fine. Whatever. I’m all those things and more, Tessia. Maybe I am a bad person. But I’ve come too far, done”—I choked up, swallowed heavily, then continued—“things, killed people, and that can’t just be for nothing. It *can’t* all have been for fucking nothing.”

Tessia was quiet for long enough that I turned around, wondering if she was still there. She was. And as she stood there and watched me thoughtfully, I sagged, the weight of my own words settling on my soul.

“Would you really burn this world to the ground if it means you and Nico get to go home?” she asked.

I nodded. “And leave Agrona to rule over the ashes.”

“And if you’re stuck here in the ashes with us?” she asked.

“Then at least there won’t be anyone left to judge me,” I said slowly, suddenly very tired.

Before she could answer, I swept my hand across the mental projection, wiping the clearing away and opening my eyes. The clouds were dark and heavy with rain. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed.

I sank beneath the clouds and into heavy rain, letting the coldness of it soothe my skin, refusing to acknowledge that the flush of my cheeks was from shame. *And the streams running down my face aren’t tears, either*.

“Cecilia!”

I flinched, not having noticed the approaching mana signature.

Nico, flying in a cocoon of wind conjured from his staff, pulled up twenty feet away, his face shielded against the wind and rain by a hand. “Are you all right? This storm came out of nowhere!”

I stared at him blankly, and it took several seconds for my thoughts to click into place. As soon as they did, the rain stopped. The clouds melted away, and we were flying in the bright, cold afternoon sun, Taegrin Caelum jutting up from the mountains beneath us.

An uncomfortably warm breeze kicked up, whipping around us and leaving us both dry in moments.

“Um, Agrona called for all the Scythes and…you. The others have already arrived. He’s expecting us immediately.”

As he turned away, I blurted out, “Am I a bad person, Nico?”

Reversing course, Nico flew closer, his worried frown deepening further. “What’s this about?”

“Nothing,” I blurted. “Never mind. We shouldn’t keep Agrona waiting.”

I sped ahead, plunging toward the fortress, flying at speed around the sprawling exterior to Agrona’s private wing, and landing on one of his many balconies.

A wall of noise hit me as the rush of wind in my ears subsided: the stomping of booted feet, the call and response of barked commands, the rush of channeled mana.

Beneath the tower, thousands of mages were arrayed in formation in the courtyard. Banners from every dominion were displayed, showing where soldiers from Etril stood separately from those of Vechor and Truacia, each force having been brought by the Scythe of that dominion.

The glass balcony doors were closed, locked, and warded, but the mana unfolded at my approach, and the latch jumped up, allowing a gust of wind to push the doors open.

Beyond was a comfortable sitting room. A fire was burning in a huge fireplace, and Agrona was leaning against a low bar. He was dressed formally in black and gold, and the ornaments in his horns caught the light and twinkled like stars as he turned to look at me. He looked just as he always had, ever since I'd known him. But, as he regarded me, his brows lifting ever so slightly, I couldn't help but think something had changed. *He* had changed, but I couldn't put my finger on how, exactly, and had to wonder if I was just imagining it.

Or maybe, I thought, *I'm the one who has changed.*

Nico eased into the room behind me and carefully closed the doors, his discomfort coming off him in waves.

"Ah, we are finally all here," Agrona said with a too-wide smile, gesturing for us to enter.

I was surprised to see Melzri and Viessa already present, seated uncomfortably on one of the plush couches filling the room. Neither met my eye. Dragoth was also present, standing in front of the fire with his back to me. His shoulders were hunched, his broad horns drooping.

More surprising was the presence of the retainers. The sickly Bivrae hunkered in the shadows, while the statuesque Echeron lingered near Dragoth, trying and failing to hide his nervousness. Mawar hovered near the windows and stared out at the Basilisk Fang Mountains, the cool light painting her changeable skin an almost translucent pale marble color.

For the first time since arriving in Alacrya, I thought I understood a little bit of how Agrona must have felt when he saw all these powerful people gathered together. Anywhere else in the world, they would have been a formidable, even overwhelming force, but here, now…they seemed so unimportant. They were nothing.

I felt Tessia's disappointment bubbling up from within.

What?

'Do you suppose this is how the researchers felt toward you as they poked and prodded you? Under such high authority, maybe they saw you as nothing more than how you are now looking at the Scythes…as an asset, soldiers to be tolerated perhaps, but not respected.'

I swallowed hard, carefully keeping my thoughts to myself.

"All my mighty Scythes and their fearsome retainers, together again," Agrona said, his arms out wide. "We are missing only our lost little lamb, Seris, and her faithful hound. Her presence would have been a wondrous gift, but alas…"

Dragoth had turned when Agrona started speaking, and he blanched at this comment. Beside him, Echeron stared at his own feet.

"Still, don't be too hard on Dragoth." Agrona flashed us a wide grin. "You've all suffered your share of defeats and failures—of embarrassments—lately, haven't you?"

Agrona smiled around like a proud and understanding father. He pushed himself up onto the bar, letting his legs kick back and forth, his heels occasionally knocking against the wood.

"But we, all of us, sometimes must take our licks and keep moving." He knocked his knuckles against the bartop a couple of times. "To mix metaphors, we've allowed our house to gather dirt for long enough. The Seris situation will come to a close in due time, but there are many other places we can begin cleaning up right now."

The Scythes and retainers exchanged uncertain glances, but no one dared interrupt Agrona, especially when he was giving off the pretense of a good

mood.

“The dragons’ presence in Dicathen means there is no longer anything to be gained from our infighting,” he continued. “While Dragoth will continue to pursue Seris in the Relictombs, the rest of you will put our house back in order. I expect, before our efforts in that department are complete, we’ll be seeing Arthur Leywin poking his head out as well, and when he does, I want you to capture or kill him.”

Melzri and Viessa shared a meaningful look.

“What are you going to be doing?” I asked, frustrated by this flippant mention of killing Grey. Grey had already defeated a squad of Agrona’s asura killers. I knew Agrona didn’t expect any of these Scythes to actually beat Grey.

Agrona cocked his head to the side, jangling the ornaments in his horns. His smile didn’t falter, but his legs stopped swinging. “Why do you ask, Cecil dear?”

I swallowed heavily, something about the look in his eye making me second guess my forthrightness. “I…just meant, if Grey is such a threat…”

Agrona’s smile widened, baring his canines, and he slid off the bar. His shadow seemed to fall over everyone at once. “Despite my feigned weakness, that cautious old dragon has been satisfied to let the situation on this world linger, allowing me to plumb the depths of the Relictombs and grow my understanding of this world’s power. Finally, though, thanks to our wayward reincarnated friend, Arthur, Kezess has opened the way between Dicathen and Epheotus. Now, as you end this silly civil war and hunt Arthur Leywin, I will be…preparing to take full advantage of Kezess’s misstep.”

Anything pleasant slid from Agrona’s face like he’d taken off a mask. Beneath was something dark and dangerous. “In my own pretense of weakness, some of you have allowed yourselves to become actually weak. I’ve given you new regalia along with my patience. It is time to prove yourselves worthy of both.”

The room seemed frozen, as if the others were no longer even breathing. Time could have stopped, and it would have changed nothing.

Agrona’s eyes traveled slowly across each of us in turn. “The Legacy will focus primarily on Arthur Leywin. If you can’t bring him whole, at least bring me his core. Make use of the Scythes as you see fit to ensure that this is done.”

He turned and swept from the room, leaving behind a deep-set and brooding silence.

14

HORNS OF EXEGES

ARTHUR LEYWIN

The night was dark, the stars hidden behind thin clouds blowing down from the Basilisk Fang Mountains in the distance.

We'd hurried through the city of Nirmala in silence. Four guards had been posted at the descension portal when we arrived; their deaths had been quick, but the fight had interrupted a conversation I'd been having with Sylvie. Now, as we crept up the side of a tall tower that overlooked Sovereign Exeges's palace, with my nerves growing more taut by the second, I focused on what she'd been saying to keep my mind from spiraling into unhelpful scenarios regarding the battle to come.

"Who do you think the voice was, then, when you were in the aetherial in-between place?"

Still clad in the relic armor, Sylvie was climbing about four feet below me to my right. It would have been easier for her and Chul to fly, but they needed to suppress their mana signatures as much as possible.

"I'm still not sure," she said quietly. "You've seen my memories. The physical aspect of it shifted…"

"But you think it could have been…your mother?"

Sylvie was quiet, her thoughts muddied.

We crested the top, pulling ourselves over the short wall surrounding the flat roof of the sandstone tower.

“I don’t know.” She knelt at the opposite edge of the roof, looking down on the Sovereign’s palace with deep frown lines etched into her face. “The shape was obviously a construct of my own mind, so it might not have anything to do with the voice at all.”

Her tale of drowning and being saved by an amorphous entity had fought for space within my thoughts for the entire journey from the Relictombs. I had hoped I would gain some insight from her story, but it only resulted in more confusion. The fact that her aetheric aptitude had changed from vivum to aevum was strange, but in a way, it made sense. Her being allowed into the Relictombs, however, made less sense to either of us. But it had been difficult to focus with the prospect of fighting a full-blooded basilisk looming on the horizon.

I had elected to bring only Sylvie and Chul with me, leaving Caera and Ellie behind to recover from their injuries—and to keep them out of harm’s way. Regis was, of course, keeping the protective shields running in the second level of the Relictombs, and I was already second-guessing my choice to do this without the Destruction godrune. Although I didn’t want it anywhere near Tessia’s body, I couldn’t pretend that facing Exeges wouldn’t have been a less concerning prospect if I had the power of Destruction in my back pocket.

In truth, Sylvie’d had precious little time to practice her new abilities, and Chul was largely untested. The half-phoenix had grown quieter and more focused as we approached Nirmala and our target. Sylvie and I had kept our steady stream of conversation out loud so as not to exclude him, but he’d largely ignored us, his thoughts turned inward and forward.

I knew how he must have felt; this would be his first true test outside the safety of the Hearth. He’d trained against full-blooded asuras his entire life, but he’d never fought one to the death before. In all, it left me less confident in the outcome than I’d have liked.

And then, if we are successful, we will have to face Cecilia as well—the Legacy, and all her unknown power.

Shaking off the thought, I took in the scene before us.

Even in the dark, the palace was an impressive structure, all graceful curves, golden domes, and jade arches. The sprawling palace wasn't surrounded by a wall, but rather a moat of water gardens that caught the occasional star and moonlight peeking through the clouds and reflected it like a many-faceted gemstone. The city of Nirmala sprawled around the palace, with the Basilisk Fang Mountains carving purple silhouettes in the distance.

"Arthur…"

I focused on the palace, bringing myself back into the moment. I realized immediately what Sylvie had sensed. "There are no mana signatures. None at all."

Chul's big hands gripped the top of the short wall that ran around the roof. When he spoke, there was a razor's edge in his voice. "Perhaps this basilisk is not present. Or he hides his signature. Basilisks are all paranoid, or so I've been told."

Although I couldn't entirely discount Chul's thoughts, it didn't make sense to me that Exeges, Sovereign of this dominion, would keep his mana signature suppressed inside his own palace. My ability to passively detect mana was only recently returned, and so I couldn't be sure if a powerful basilisk would be strong enough to completely shield himself from Realmheart or not. Thoughts and fears began to stampede through my mind as I tried to consider all the many possibilities.

"Perhaps it is too much for his Alacryan guards, or even the people of the city?" Sylvie suggested. "Aldir and Windsom have always kept the full force of their auras withdrawn when in lesser lands."

"But I sense no guards, no servants. He wouldn't only keep unadorned soldiers around him, unless…" A basilisk such as Exeges had little to fear from his people. Did he really need guards? Still, this wasn't what I had expected, and I was sharply on edge.

Chul went down on one knee, his bright orange eye shining in the dark. “You suspect a trap?” His fists crunched through the sandstone barrier, making all three of us flinch. “We should not have entrusted so many Alacryans with our plan,” he added in a stage whisper.

We watched in silence for several more minutes, tension slowly mounting between us, but the streets were quiet and there was no activity from the palace or surrounding buildings. Finally, I accepted that there was only one way to get a better understanding of what we were facing. “Let’s go.”

Leaping off the roof, I plunged toward the ground below. By reinforcing my body with aether, my legs absorbed the shock of the landing noiselessly.

Sylvie and Chul drifted down behind me, whisper-quiet and leaking only a hint of mana.

We darted across the road and along the wall of a single-story building, then into the water gardens. Bounding from rock to rock, we avoided the natural paths through the water garden, which were all lit with softly glowing lighting artifacts. I could tell where several guard posts were naturally integrated into the sprawling pools, tall grasses, banks of hedges, and carefully placed river stones. But, as I’d seen from the rooftop, the gardens were empty.

An eerie feeling crawled across my skin, but I kept my course until we stood beneath the outer wall of the palace, near the main entrance.

Peeking around the corner, I confirmed that there were no guards outside.

Before moving into the open, my eyes swept the gardens and the city beyond for anything I could see or sense that might hint at an onlooker. The densest concentration of mana was in a rectangular two-story complex nearby. Judging from the simplicity of the building and the density of mages within it, I could only assume it was some kind of barracks. Most of the very few people we’d seen moving in the streets were mages as well, almost all guards patrolling the city.

Once sure that we weren’t being observed, I slipped around the shadowy corner and darted to the brightly lit main doors. The towering doors, painted

dark green and inlaid with gold, silver, and jade, opened with a light push, noiseless on their well-maintained hinges.

The entrance beyond was brightly lit, revealing a mosaic floor broken by two rows of pillars. Carefully maintained plants draped from the ceiling and grew along the walls. No guards were present.

I could sense Sylvie's unease leaking through our connection. *Maybe it really is empty,* I sent.

'Could Agrona have withdrawn his Sovereigns, fearing something like this might happen?' Sylvie asked as she and Chul followed me into the palace. *'Maybe Chul was right, and some part of our plan was leaked.'*

I pushed the door shut behind us, my mind cluttered with competing ideas, each one less likely than the last. There were too many questions, but the only way to get more answers was to delve further inside.

We crossed the entrance hall to a series of smaller doors that opened into a wide hallway that ran down the center of the palace. According to Seris, we would find Sovereign Exeges's throne room directly ahead.

After taking a moment to sense for mana signatures beyond the row of closed doors, I eased one open. A weight pushed from the other side, forcing it open more quickly than I'd expected. I stepped back, an aether blade in hand and aimed at the door.

A figure slumped through, their armored head hitting the tile floor with a noise like a gong. The ringing resounded through the silent palace for what felt like the length of a song.

Chul, his huge weapon held ready in one hand, stepped cautiously forward until he was standing over the armored man. Frowning, he met my eye. "Dead." With his other hand, he opened the door wider, revealing a dozen more bodies on the other side.

I leaned down next to Chul and pressed my fingers against the guard's neck. Not only was there no pulse, but the flesh was as cold as the steel covering his body. His skin was pale, and there was a haunted gauntness to what I could see of his face. A quick inspection revealed no marks of battle on

either the steel or flesh, though. Wanting to be thorough, I rolled the body onto its side, but there were no wounds on the back either.

“It’s the same for the rest,” Sylvie said softly as she moved from corpse to corpse. “And look at how they’re lying. It’s as if…”

“They just collapsed,” I finished.

Each body was crumpled like a puppet with cut strings. Their weapons weren’t even out of their sheaths. Stranger, though, was the fact that they were devoid of purified mana, with only traces of water- and earth-attribute mana lingering around them.

Chul clutched his weapon in both hands, staring up and down the hallway as if expecting to be attacked at any moment. “It…it’s as though the candle of their lifeforce has simply been snuffed out.”

“Come on.” I moved cautiously, following the thick red carpet that ran down the center of the hallway. There were more than a dozen doors to the left and right, providing a perfect kill chamber for an ambush. I kept my senses trained on them, waiting for the scratch of boots on tile or the moan of hinges turning, but the only noise was what we made. “We have to know if Exeges is here or not, then we can get the hell out of here.”

“The sooner the better,” Sylvie said under her breath. “Something is very wrong here.”

A huge arched, gilded set of doors blocked the end of the hallway. Holding my breath and infusing my senses with aether, I listened at the door. All was quiet beyond.

I gave a nod to Chul, but as we reached for the door, the lighting artifacts at the far end of the hall flickered. I whirled, an aether blade in my hand.

No one was there, and I sensed no mana either.

“May the ancients guide us and shield us from Wraiths in the quiet night…” Chul mumbled under his breath like a prayer. When it became clear that we were still alone, he cleared his throat and turned back to the door, looking at me questioningly.

Together, we pushed, and the massive doors swung open.

‘What in the world…’ Sylvie thought, her wide-eyed gaze slowly tracking across the space beyond.

We had reached the throne room, a cavernous space capable of holding a fully grown, transformed dragon—*or basilisk*, I thought. Black iron arches swept from floor to ceiling in graceful architectural designs, stark against the golden dome of the roof and the reds and golds of the tile floor, carpets, and rugs. The walls were covered in stained glass and woven tapestries, but I only took note of them in a vague way, as I couldn’t focus on much else beyond the dozens of bodies splayed throughout the room.

My attention caught on one body in particular.

Near the far end of the chamber, an ornate throne of black iron sat on a golden plinth. A man was draped over the throne.

I took a step toward the throne, then flinched and spun at a heavy ringing *crack* from behind.

The head of Chul’s weapon was partially embedded in the shattered tiles at his feet. His face had flushed a deep red. “Who could have beaten us to the Sovereign?”

“And how did they manage to do…all this?” Sylvie asked, moving carefully between the corpses.

Like before, these people all seemed to have simply dropped dead wherever they sat or stood.

I crossed the throne room to the throne itself, where Sovereign Exeges’s remains rested. His skin was ashen and had a taut, sunken appearance, as if it were pulled too tight over the bones beneath. His open eyes stared blindly, the irises colorless. He looked as if someone had drained all the blood and life from his body, but there was no wound anywhere, except…

To each side of his head, a slightly bloodied hole remained where someone had ripped the horns from his skull.

“This must have happened recently.” Sylvie had moved up to stand beside me. One hand covered her mouth as she stared at the ghastly remains of the Sovereign. “Surely the palace would be swarming with Agrona’s soldiers and mages if anyone else had discovered this yet.”

“What does this mean for your plan?” Chul asked, half lifting one of the many bodies to examine it, then letting the limp form fall unceremoniously back to the floor.

It means perhaps there is still time before I’ll have to face Cecilia, I thought, careful to keep my relief from bleeding over to Sylvie. Out loud, I said only, “I’m not sure yet. It’s possible we have some as-yet-unknown ally, but before we can figure out who killed these people, we need to know how they died.”

“It doesn’t look like the work of dragons…” Sylvie thought out loud, kneeling next to a body. “Although, perhaps some powerful aether technique…?”

Chul, now standing next to me, took hold of Exeges’s face in one overlarge hand, turning the head this way and that. “Pah. This death should have been mine.” His hand moved down to the dead basilisk’s throat, but I caught his wrist.

“Stop. We need the corpse intact. Taking out your anger on it won’t help anything.”

Chul gritted his teeth. “You are right. But how do you intend to discover who is responsible for—”

Mana blazed into motion everywhere at once, condensing into a solid barrier that encompassed the entire palace grounds. The ceiling quaked, collapsing a huge chunk of gold-plated stone. A gale of freezing wind whipped through the opening, coiling into three smaller vortices that wrapped around Sylvie, Chul, and me.

Aether erupted from me, deflecting the wind, and my gaze locked onto the figure floating down through the broken ceiling, her gunmetal hair billowing.

Tessia. *Cecilia.*

My jaws clenched as I stared deep into her turquoise eyes for any sign of the girl I had loved.

Cecilia’s focus slipped away from me to the corpse on the throne, her lips pursing into a contemptuous pout. “What sort of trick did you use to kill Sovereign Exeges without even a scratch on you?”

“What?” I stared, taking a moment to comprehend the meaning of her words. “We didn't—”

Chul let out a cacophonous battle cry as he ripped through Cecilia’s spell and charged, his weapon leaving behind a trail of orange phoenix fire.

Cecilia raised her hand, the fire-attribute mana sparking as she transformed it into its lightning deviant. The vortices burst with white light as dozens of lightning bolts ripped through me.

The glass cage of inaction around me shattered.

Reaching for the aether interwoven throughout the twin vortices buffeting Sylvie and me, I ripped at the fabric of the spell. It resisted. I pushed harder, forcing out more of my own aether, and as Cecilia’s attention turned to Chul, her hold over the mana weakened. The spell dissolved, and the cyclones melted away.

As Cecilia gathered a spell to counter Chul’s charge, I experienced a flash of cold realization: in her sternum, where her core had once been, now there was a void. The mana that reacted to her did so from all throughout her body, and even the atmosphere around her.

She had no core.

“Chul, no!”

A barrage of glowing missiles streaked through the air between Cecilia and Chul, lifting him up off his feet and hurling him backward.

The shadows coalesced above where he fell, and an inky black blade slashed at his throat.

Conjuring an aether blade in the air above him, I deflected the blow. Chul jumped to his feet, spinning as he did so in order to backhand his attacker, a

shadowy figure who looked like she'd been dipped in ink. She flew backward, crashed through the wall, and vanished in a cloud of dust and rubble.

Cecilia bared her teeth, snarling, and the mana all around us began to pull back. Chul stumbled, and Sylvie let out a surprised gasp.

If I hadn't been ready for this kind of attack, having seen her attempt the same thing at the Victoriad, the fight might have ended before it even began.

Expelling two concentrated bursts of aether from my core, I sheathed Sylvie and Chul in violet energy. My aether clamped down on the mana around them both, holding it in against the violent draw of Cecilia's power.

"Cecilia, wait!" I shouted, holding my hands up, most of my focus on my companions.

The ground liquified, the stone tiles running like water. I plunged in up to my waist, the mana-affected stone sucking me down like quicksand. Aether flowed out of me to counter the mana, rending the spell and shattering the floor as it was blasted away by the opposing forces. All that energy spilled back along the traces left behind by Cecilia's mana manipulation, but before it reached her, she wrested control of the mana away from me again, and the combined aether and mana dissipated.

In that instant she was distracted, I activated God Step and vanished into the aetheric pathways, appearing wreathed in amethyst electricity just behind her.

Her arm whipped around, a concentrated blaze of lightning and fire gathering in her fist. I twisted the mana and aether between us. The spell fired from her fingers as a solid beam, but distorted as I pulled it apart mid-cast. A hundred smaller rays seared past me in every direction to demolish the wall behind me.

Batting away her arm, my fingers closed around her throat. Her eyes went wide, and she collapsed backward, slamming into the ground with my knee pressed firmly against her sternum.

“Listen to me,” I pleaded. “I want to help you, Cecilia—to save you and Tessia both—I just need—”

A barrage of different elements bombarded me from above, knocking me back, and a handful of figures flew down through the hole in the ceiling.

I recognized the Scythes Viessa and Melzri immediately. The third figure to enter, who dropped down heavily instead of flying, caught me off guard, the garish, grinning mask sending me wheeling into flashbacks of years before. The masked man who led the attack against Xyrus Academy—Draneeve—had fled with Elijah before I arrived, but I’d heard the stories and descriptions in the years after.

I was even more surprised when the twisted but familiar visage of Nico followed Draneeve.

Nico had aged since I’d last seen him; he had dark bags under his eyes, standing out against his pale flesh, and his hair was windblown, his clothes loose over his thin frame. His core was no longer true white but stained by the wound I’d given him. I couldn’t immediately guess how it had been healed but assumed either Cecilia or Agrona were responsible.

From Caera’s message, I knew he was alive. But I hadn’t expected to meet him in battle again, not after the Victoriad.

He clutched a staff that radiated a tremendous amount of mana that cycled between the four crystals inset in its head, each one glowing in the color of a specific elemental attribute: green, red, yellow, and blue.

Elijah. Nico. My oldest friend in either world.

I saw this all in the space between one heartbeat and the next, and then my focus was drawn back to Cecilia.

Mana had condensed around her body in a thick barrier like a radiant silhouette. An arm of transparent mana, sprouting from just beneath her own, reached for my throat. I flashed backward as more spells rained down on me from above and Cecilia floated up off the ground, wreathed in this halo of mana that made it look as if she had six arms.

“Well done bringing this incursion to our attention, Mawar,” Viessa said, her voice like black ice. “You and Melzri, handle the dragon. Draneeve, with me. Let the reincarnates deal with their own.”

‘Focus on Tessia,’ Sylvie thought from across the room as she prepared to defend herself. *‘Chul and I can handle ourselves against the others.’*

Nico was staring at me with such intensity that I hesitated. Mana was building in his staff, the green and red gems flaring, but the desperation shining in his eyes was just as bright.

Cecilia’s mana-formed limbs all thrust forward simultaneously. The world seemed to come undone around me as the air turned to fire, wind to blades, and stone to lava.

The aether sheathing my skin trembled against the onslaught, but I couldn’t exert my will on the mana, couldn’t break the spell apart or even distort it. Her focus was too great, her control too precise. As my skin began to crack and blister beneath the fading aether, I God Stepped away, blindly following the paths into the air to appear between Cecilia and Nico.

The first thing I saw from my new vantage was Nico’s dark eyes. He was staring straight into mine. “Don’t fight us, Grey,” he said instantly, the words bursting out of him in a rush. “If you come peacefully, we’ll let your bond and the phoenix go.”

A hand formed of mana wrapped around my ankle and dragged me downward. Spinning, I unleashed an aether-clad kick against Cecilia’s side. The impact of aether and mana sent a shockwave through the throne room, tumbling the black iron arches and bringing parts of the remaining ceiling down on us.

Gritting my teeth, I God Stepped again, blinking behind Cecilia as she struggled to right herself in the air.

Instantly, a barrage of frozen fire slammed into me from behind as Nico launched the spell he’d been charging. Most of the bolts burst against my defense, but a few pierced my weakened barrier and shattered inside my skin, sending shrapnel of burning ice spraying through my muscles.

I raised my arm, an aetheric blast ripping out of my palm and at Nico. Conjured wind and earth sprang up as a barrier between us, but it gave me time to disrupt his spell and break down the shards burrowing painfully into my muscles. Aether rushed to the wounds and began healing me instantly.

The air suddenly thickened like porridge in my lungs. It coalesced over my eyes, making the whole world go blurry. When I tried to rend the spell with aether, it resisted again, Cecilia's control pushing back against my own.

Closing my eyes, I stepped into the aetheric pathways again, appearing in the center of the throne room and sucking in a deep breath.

From the corner of my eye, I watched as Chul's weapon shattered a wide stretch of tile floor as Draneeve only just darted out of the way. Viessa was flying high above, near the collapsing roof, a constant stream of black missiles spilling from the shadows around her to striking Chul from every direction.

Even as I considered moving to help him, he spun with surprising speed and drove the butt of his weapon into Draneeve's face. The grotesque mask shattered, and blood burst from the nose, mouth, and eyes of the plain-featured face beneath as Draneeve crashed to the ground.

Behind the throne, Sylvie was dodging between the combined assault from Melzri and her retainer—Mawar, Viessa had called her. The two Alacryans were a whirl of blades and spells, but Sylvie seemed to move faster than should be possible, her body skipping and jerking through space with strobelike flashes of aether. With each aevum-oriented lurch of her physical body, a bolt of pure mana appeared, jerking just as unnaturally toward her opponents.

Melzri dashed one aside with her soul flame-wreathed blade and spun around another. Mawar seemed to melt into the shadows, no clear beginning or end of her body, as two bolts passed right through her. A third struck home, and I could make out a choked gasp of pain, but my attention was forced back to Cecilia before I was able to confirm the retainer's state.

The Legacy's command over mana was incredible, far beyond anything I'd seen before. She could manipulate and combine atmospheric mana with a thought, using it in a way I could have only dreamed when I was a quadra-

elemental mage. I couldn’t keep up with her in that way; it was foolish to waste energy trying to overpower her control of mana.

In both lives, though, she’d been reliant on the unusual amount of power granted by her nature as the Legacy. Her technique was sloppy, and her mana manipulation lacked creativity. These were weaknesses I could take advantage of.

Aether condensed in my muscles and joints, and Burst Step, powered by hundreds of precisely timed explosions of aether, carried me back across the room in a near-instant blink. Aether burst along my shoulders, biceps, elbow, forearm, and wrist, and shrouded my fist protectively, delivering an impossibly fast and powerful blow at the end of my step.

The blow landed against Cecilia’s chest even as her eyes remained focused on where I had been a moment before.

As if time had slowed down, I watched cracks spread across her mana shroud, white-hot lightning bolts over her physical form. Like a dark mirror, the same cracks raced over the aetheric barrier around my arm, from my knuckles up to my elbow.

Her body twisted to the side, and my Burst Strike skated off the surface of her protective spell, my momentum carrying me past her. In my left hand, I conjured an aether blade, sweeping it behind me. One of her arms came up to ward off the blow, and once again aether shivered against mana, the two opposing forces struggling for superiority.

This time, my concentration won out. The blade sheared through her transparent mana arm and jammed into her side, only just breaking the skin.

An enraged shout came from above, and my eyes flicked up to it automatically: Nico was breathing hard, his face red with anger. Clenching his fist, he jerked it upward, and I felt the mana condensing below me. Leaping into the air, I avoided a dozen black iron spikes that ripped through the floor.

Placing one foot on the side of a spike, I launched myself higher, taking aim at Nico.

As I flew toward him, I remembered his message. *You owe her a life*. He didn’t know. Even after all this time, he didn’t know why Cecilia had really died. And yet he had still reached out to me, sent me Sylvia’s core as an offering of peace. But here, he’d attacked me, made no effort to stop this fight from happening.

In the end, it came down to just one thing: if he wanted anything from me, he had to earn it.

My blade drove at Nico’s throat. The wind gusting around him turned, pulling him up and away, but too slow. Flesh parted as the shaped aether opened the side of his neck—

I jerked to a halt as something wrapped around my arm.

Looking down, I was caught off guard by an emerald-green vine, thick as my waist, sprouting from Cecilia’s hand. Her mana form was gone, and in that moment, it was like the last couple of years just faded away. I was seeing Tessia as she had been: radiant and desperate, protective and frightened, beautiful…

Then a nova of mana boiled out from her, hurling me away. Corpses were tossed like dolls across the room, the iron supports twisted and ripped from their moorings, walls blew outward, parts of the ceiling collapsed heavily all around us.

I landed on my feet across the throne room, leaning forward to stop my backward slide. Cecilia was floating over a giant hole in the floor, which had been blasted into a crater by her attack. Next to her, Nico had shielded himself with a spherical bubble of multicolored mana.

Most of the throne room was alight with phoenix fire. Uncontrolled bursts of it were leaping from Chul in seemingly random directions as he shouted and swung his weapon wildly; Viessa was nowhere to be seen, and I couldn’t sense her mana either.

“Stop cowering in your shadows and face me like a man!” Chul roared, his eyes blazing and chest heaving with each furious breath.

“Is swinging your club like a beast truly the extent of the Asclepius clan's strength?” An icy voice radiated through the air, oozing out of the shadows

from every direction at once. “As weak-minded as your mother, it would seem.”

The flames leaking out of Chul turned jagged and frenzied, mirroring his emotions. “How dare—”

Suddenly, Chul's head snapped to the side as he caught sight of his target. He leapt into the air with a victorious shout as his burning weapon drew a bright orange arc toward Sylvie, Mawar, and Melzri.

The weapon came down, followed by a trail of fire like a comet.

Sylvie gasped as the blow struck her across the side of the head, and she crumpled.

My stomach dropped and bile rose as sudden understanding filled me like water in my lungs.

Behind me, I sensed the condensing mana as Cecilia unleashed yet another attack. Before me, Chul lifted his weapon for another strike.

I stepped into the aetheric pathways and appeared standing over my bond. The weapon came down, and I grabbed it by the handle, my arms quaking beneath Chul’s asuran strength.

His eyes bulged. “My brother in vengeance! Why do you protect the enemy?”

“An illusion,” I ground out, hardly able to speak. “Chul, snap out of it! It’s Sylvie, you’re attacking Sylvie—”

A blade wreathed in soul fire sliced across the aether protecting my torso. A black blade of shadow struck against my back.

Swords of aether appeared floating in the air around me, and I slashed out with them wildly, driving the Scythe and retainer back.

Chul wrenched his weapon free and stumbled away, shaking his head, his eyes going in and out of focus. He waved a hand through the air like he was brushing aside cobwebs. “No…no! You’re—”

I was forced to dodge aside as a blast of mana took Chul in the chest, lifting him up and slamming him into the twisted remains of a black iron pillar. Behind me, Sylvie floated up from the ground, her glazed eyes on Chul, her face a stoic mask. Blast after blast of pure mana pummeled Chul, driving him through the iron and then into the wall beyond.

As I prepared to activate God Step yet again, a force like the hand of a god itself came down on me. The floor beneath my feet ruptured, my body growing so heavy not even solid stone could support me. My back bent and my head bowed. I struggled to move, even to step into the aetheric pathways.

Cecilia fell upon me like a thunderbolt. She was again wreathed in her otherworldly mana form, blasts of wind, ice, fire, earth, and lightning erupting from her mana-forged limbs to rain down atop me.

I raised one hand and unleashed an aetheric blast. A cone of vibrant purple force crashed against her mana, and for an instant, I felt a reprieve.

Raking my aether through the air like a hand through cobwebs, I tried to disrupt the illusions affecting my companions, but the air was so thick with the distortion of Cecilia’s mana that it was impossible to isolate and cancel Viessa’s spell.

A white-hot beam of radiant fire-attribute mana enveloped me. I carved through it with the aether blade, splitting the beam in two, the twin shards carving fifty-foot-long trenches in what little remained of the throne room to either side of me. As the blade whirled in the air, I was already activating God Step, the aetheric pathways lighting up before me like so many arcs of amethyst lightning.

The light faded, and my gaze met Cecilia’s.

Her stare, had I seen it on Tessia’s face in any other circumstance, would have cut right through me. But just for a second, I thought I saw something else too. Regret? Understanding? Maybe even a strange, twisted reflection of my own complicated feelings?

My jaw clenched at the choice that had to be made.

The aether blade plunged into the interwoven threads of aether.

A scream rent the air.

15

A SWORD STRUCK

MY SWORD, conjured of pure aether and held together by my will alone, plunged into the interwoven threads of aether around me.

Revealed by the God Step godrune, the network of amethyst paths connected every point to every other point—*through* the aetheric realm, I had learned from the last djinn projection. The godrune had changed when I made that realization, and the knowledge had sat dormant in the back of my mind ever since, a deepening of insight but without a clear use.

Until the moment of necessity when I had no choice but to translate knowledge into action.

My senses flowed through the aether, the paths, the in-between space that connected everything together.

I saw Cecilia, the final vestiges of her last attack still burning the atmosphere between us, the many-armed silhouette of mana wrapped around the body she'd taken from Tessia. And Nico beside her, his uncertain gaze drifting between us, his hand reaching for her shoulder but not daring to touch her.

The aether blade plunged deeper into the lightning-bolt network of aether.

I saw Draneeve, his unconscious form curled up beneath a chunk of fallen stone from the roof, his shattered mask in the rubble at his side, and Mawar, the inky shield clinging to her flesh not able to hide the steady flow of blood from her lips, and Melzri in front of her, her bloodshot, blood-colored eyes slicing through the air like her blades as she changed focus from me to Sylvie's back.

The pathways drew my strike into themselves, guiding it through space itself.

I saw the collection of mana particles shrouding the figure in the shadows of the twisted and broken ceiling, the threads of mana under her control spilling across the chamber and down on Sylvie and Chul like probing fingers in their brains.

The blade struck home, and a scream rent the air.

Each point, connecting each other point. The connective tissue of this world, the aetheric realm. A strike delivered from one space but falling in another.

A beam of violet light hovered for an instant in the air. Shadows rippled, and Viessa formed around it, the blade sprouting out of her sternum. She coiled in on herself like a spider, her scream cutting off just as sharply as it had sounded, but her mouth remained open, her silent cry somehow even worse than the banshee wail. As she writhed, waves of purple hair rose up around her face like a ghostly nimbus.

I pulled the blade free, and it retracted back through the aetheric paths, sliding out of her body so that she plummeted to the ground.

Cecilia and Nico had both looked toward the source of the scream. Melzri was frozen in place, horrified and transfixed as she watched the other Scythe bounce off the crumbling tiles. The only noise for a handful of heartbeats was the crackling of phoenix fire.

Despite the blood matting her hair to her head from where Chul had struck her, the pieces of Sylvie's confused mind slid smoothly back into rhythm with the illusion spell broken. She lunged forward to grab Chul's arm. His

face was slack, his eyes glazed over, and he did not fight her as she jerked him out of the way as Cecilia sent twin blades of mana slicing toward them.

“Cecilia!” I shouted, unleashing an aetheric blast from my open palm.

Nico dodged to the side, but Cecilia took the blast head on, aether rippling over the surface of the mana condensed around her. With one mana-formed hand, she waved away the last vestiges of the blast like smoke. Still, her attention snapped back to me, her spell slicing deep into the floor but missing my companions.

I let the point of my sword dip toward the ground, but my knuckles were white as I gripped the aetheric handle. “Enough of this.” I looked up from my blade, my gaze hard. “Cecilia, come with me. I’ll try to find a way to separate you and Tessia.”

She scoffed, her cheeks turning bright red, her lips twisted in a disbelieving sneer. “As if I could be so easily swayed—or tricked. You are a liar, Grey, and a bad one.”

Behind her, Nico’s mouth half opened. He hesitated, his throat working dryly, then finally said, “We should hear Arthur out…his insights into aether surpass even the dragons’. Maybe he can—”

Cecilia cut him off. “Don’t be fooled.” Her eyes flicked from Nico to me, then back again. “He's the one who killed me, remember?”

I couldn’t help but let out a dry, humorless laugh. “Has your mind twisted your memories after all of these years, or did Agrona do that for you?” Speaking to Nico, I continued, unable to mask the bitterness in my tone. “The hatred you have for me—the reason you’ve strived so hard to destroy everything I cherish—was based on a lie. I wasn't the one who killed Cecilia. She—”

“Shut up!” Cecilia screeched, the blistering emotion in her voice so raw that it stunned Nico and me both.

“So…” I started, realization dawning slowly, “it isn’t that you didn't remember…but you’ve chosen to lie to and manipulate the only man who has ever loved you—”

Like a sudden hot breath on the back of my neck, black wind slammed into me from behind. A pent-up scream exploded into the air, oozing fury and loss.

I spared a quick glance back, squinting against the storm of void wind.

Melzri was kneeling next to Viessa, the other Scythe's limp body pulled into her arms. She was rocking back and forth, her mouth half open, disbelief and horror written in every line of her face. The void wind was spilling out of her, a physical manifestation of her grief.

Then her eyes met mine, and she seemed to collapse into herself, the scream becoming a snarl, all that tension exploding downward as she dropped the corpse and leapt into the air, one blade gripped in both hands and trailing soul fire like a dark flag.

Black wind buffeted me, pushing dust and smoke into my eyes, coiling around my limbs and throat, tangling in my hair, and attempting to pull me off balance. Tendrils of Cecilia's mana wove in and around Melzri's, reinforcing the spell and holding it against my influence.

I felt the regalia imprinted halfway up her spine activate as she channeled mana into it. Mana condensed from the atmosphere and into her spells. Her body swelled with it, hardening and strengthening. The sword blazed darker, the flames roaring ten feet up from the blade. The wind's claws sharpened, digging deeper and harder. Cold white flames licked her body, a thousand candle flames burning from her pores as she overloaded on mana.

Aether burst throughout my hips, spine, shoulders, and arms, instantly bringing my blade up into a defensive position with enough power to rip through the clutching wind. The Burst Strike delivered all its potency directly into the center mass of her weapon.

With a gust, the soul flames puffed out like a candle. Steel shrieked, and the sword exploded, sending a shrapnel of broken metal spraying across the throne room. Melzri's arm wrenched unnaturally, and something inside cracked and splintered.

Her momentum carried her past me, where she stumbled and fell to her knees, clutching her broken hand and arm with the other.

Mana condensed around her, scooping her up and carrying her away from me. “Go,” Cecilia said. “You are no more use here.”

I could have stopped her, could have followed Melzri and struck her and her retainer down before she could withdraw the tempus warp from her dimension artifact, but I had a feeling that whatever punishment Agrona would deal out in response to their failure here would be worse than the quick death I could offer.

As the tempus warp wrapped Melzri, Mawar, and Viessa’s body in mana and pulled them away, I let it happen.

Mana was already coiling around Cecilia, preparing to strike, but Nico flew between us. I was surprised when he turned his back on me. “What did Grey mean just now?” he asked Cecilia.

“It’s all in the past,” she answered, jaw tight and eyes flaring. “It’s not what’s important now—or for the future!”

“I never murdered Cecilia!” I snapped, my ire rising.

Nothing about Cecilia’s or Nico’s actions made sense to me. Nico had apparently made himself a weapon for an evil tyrant purely to revive his dead love, but then he had allowed her to be turned into a weapon as well—a fate identical to that of her last life, which she had killed herself on my blade to escape. In return, she hadn’t even told him the truth and seemed to be using his hatred of me to continue to fuel this confrontation.

He had reached out to me, hadn’t he? Sent me Sylvia’s mana core as a token and a plea so I would help Cecilia—how, I had no idea—but he’d made no effort to stem the violence of this confrontation.

“Liar. I watched as your blade went through her, Grey!” he yelled, bobbing up and down in the air, the mana vibrating around him in agitation.

Cecilia slashed her hand in the air, and I dodged as mana gouged through the floor like a giant scythe. “This isn’t even about what happened on Earth! Nico, Agrona wants Grey’s core. That’s it! Grey doesn’t matter anymore, he’s just a bump in the road between us and getting exactly what you want, don’t you see?”

Before Nico could respond, the mana around Cecilia surged. Thousands of fist-sized chunks of rubble jumped up into the air, flying high above our heads. In an instant, they were burning bright orange, heated from within by her power. I saw what was coming before it happened.

Shield yourself! I sent to Sylvie.

The dark sky was alight with ten thousand new stars. Then the stars began to fall.

Burning meteors punched through what little remained of the ceiling and burst against the floor all around me. The throne room vanished in a cloud of dust and the heat-haze afterglow of a thousand luminous projectiles streaking through the air.

I sensed more than saw the swelling of mana around Sylvie and Chul as the first of the meteors struck them.

Dodging back from one meteor, I pivoted as another glanced off my shoulder, then slipped into the woven paths of God Step to avoid a cluster of the projectiles.

The palace was crumbling, the air choked with heat and dust. My ears rang from the concussive blast of the meteor shower, and sulfur burned my nose and lungs.

The beating of wings sent gusts of wind billowing through the palace, carrying away the dust in large swirls and revealing a towering silhouette.

Dark scales reflected starlight, and huge golden eyes glowered around at the wreckage. Sylvie’s graceful draconic neck lifted high toward the heavens, and she bared rows of fangs like swords. A long, serpentine tail shifted through the rubble, sending broken stone cascading into the many gouges ripped through the floor.

She gave a shake of her neck and wings, dislodging the meteors that had penetrated her mana shields to lodge in her scales.

Chul stepped out from her shadow, unhurt as he gazed up at the dragon in amazement.

The beating of Sylvie's wings revealed the full devastation of Cecilia's spell. The entire center of the structure had been leveled; the throne room was all but gone, just a pit in the ground.

I felt a shift in the aether around me. The relic armor had left Sylvie when she transformed, and I could once again feel it tethered to me. Touching that tether, I conjured the armor onto my body.

Cecilia gazed down at me in disappointment as the black scales feathered into being over my flesh. Beside her, Nico was pale and fidgeting nervously.

I held his dark eyes. "How do you expect me to help someone who doesn't want it?" I asked, unconvinced he would respond. "Or was your message just meant to throw me off?"

"Message?" Cecilia snapped, looking sharply back over her shoulder at Nico. "What message?"

I wasn't surprised that he hadn't told her, but I seized on the opportunity to keep them both talking. "Nico sent me a gift and asked me to help you. He said I 'owed you a life.' Because you never told him what you did." My tone grew sharper as I spoke, my anger burning just below the surface. "You killed yourself on my blade, Cecilia! Do you even remember why?"

She blanched. I saw in her haunted gaze the memory of that moment, and I knew she remembered all too well.

"W-what?" Nico choked out.

Cecilia reached for Nico, although her fingers stopped just short of touching him. "It's more complicated than that. I—"

"You knew they'd use him against you, Cecilia," I cut in, unable to mask the frustration and bitterness in my voice. "You made me *kill* you because you knew there wasn't any other way out, not for you, not for Nico. You died to protect him!" I scoffed, clenching my fists so hard that the bones ached. "Damnit, I don't understand either of you. There is nothing to justify what you're doing for Agrona—"

"Enough!" Cecilia screamed.

The word resounded throughout the ruined palace, growing louder and louder with each reverberation. The few remnants of structure around us collapsed. My hands clapped to my ears. I felt blood trickle from my nose. To my right, Chul leaned on his weapon, his arms wrapped around his head, his teeth bared like an animal. Above us both, Sylvie's head lowered, her eyes closed against the punishing volume.

Taking a steadying breath, I reached for the mana with my aether. The manifestation was wild and uncontrolled, lacking the overpowering force of Cecilia's focus. I broke it, and the noise faded away, leaving an echo ringing in my ears.

Cecilia had already turned back to Nico. "I'm sorry! I was afraid you were still under Agrona's influence, and that something bad might happen if I told you."

"It's true?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. "Grey didn't…?"

She shook her head, her body tense, her limbs pulling inward like she wanted to curl up into the fetal position.

Nico pulled away, aghast. "But I *saw*…"

"I'm sorry," Cecilia repeated quietly. She waited for a moment, watching him carefully. "Does this mean your mind isn't controlled by Agrona?"

Nico dragged his hands down his face. "Whatever he'd done to inflate my rage and bury the talents of my previous life leaked out of my core when Grey pierced it at the Victoriad." His voice was flat, totally devoid of emotion. "But I knew what he'd done to your memories, Cecilia. I *knew*—I *helped*…and I thought you were still…" He hung his head, his staff dangling limply at his side. "I'm so sorry…"

They were completely engrossed in each other, their worlds having shrunk to the few feet around themselves in any direction. A cold, distant part of my mind—the piece of King Grey that I had resurrected to survive my trials in Alacrya—recognized the opportunity. A quick thrust of my aether blade and I could end the threat they each posed right there. Whatever Agrona planned for the Legacy made even Kezess Indrath fearful. Striking them both down would end that threat, and possibly the war.

After all, I hadn’t discovered some fatal flaw in Cecilia’s magic. Fighting her had brought me no closer to understanding how to separate Tessia and Cecilia. Tess was a warrior, no stranger to risking her life on the field of combat. She had been ready to die fighting in the dungeons beneath the Beast Glades, in the forests of Elenoir, in the city streets against Nico and Cadell…

She would understand. She would forgive me.

But could I ever forgive myself? I’d already denied myself the chance once, choosing to strike out at Viessa instead of Cecilia when the opportunity had presented itself. Did I really think I was prepared to end Tessia’s life alongside Cecilia’s?

“How can you be so certain?” Nico asked, his voice rising in frustration and drawing my attention back to them. “Because I don’t know anymore.”

After a beat of hesitation, Cecilia took Nico’s hands in her own. “Those are just the words of that awful Scythe sticking in your head. If Agrona can reincarnate us from across the universe—bring us into this world and make us powerful with only the resources he has now—why wouldn’t he be able to send us back with all the power of Epheotus at his disposal?”

There was a pause, and she dropped his hands, turning to look at me with dawning realization. “Is that why you took the dragon’s core? To ask Grey for help? You…want us to turn against Agrona?”

Nico’s pale face went even whiter. “No, of course not—”

“Grey can’t help us!” she shouted, her voice magically amplified but lacking the crushing resonance of her last sonic attack. “We’ve given everything to this, to Agrona. And we’re so close! Don’t let Grey manipulate you. He just wants his precious elf girl back. He’d kill me to get to her, you know he would.”

Nico also looked at me, frowning with confusion. “I…”

“Maybe I would,” I interjected honestly, my tone bitter and cold. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you back then, Cecilia. I was so engrossed in my stupid quest to reach the top—to be powerful enough to right the wrongs that

happened to our home, to Headmaster Wilbeck—that I ignored everything else.”

The air between us changed, becoming charged with aether as I reached inward to pull at all the strength and determination I could manifest. My gaze sharpened, aether swirling in response to this pull, as if it was acknowledging my will. All my focus and energy homed in on Cecilia. She stared back, those turquoise eyes hard and unyielding.

“And I'm sorry, Nico. I don't think I can do what you asked.”

God Step wrapped around me, and I appeared at Tessia's side, aetheric lightning racing across the scales of the relic armor. A blade shivered into being in my fist, poised to plunge into the hollow at the base of her throat.

Cecilia’s arms, both flesh and mana, flowed smoothly into position to block the strike, just as I’d anticipated.

Aether hardened beneath my foot, and I pushed off it with all the well-orchestrated force of Burst Step. The platform shattered, but not before I took the near-instant step to Nico, my arm moving faster than sight as I simultaneously activated Burst Strike.

Barrier after barrier of mana hardened the air between my blade and its target. Each one cracked and then shattered, one by one, the air between us bursting with showers of mana like fireworks. The blade came down on Nico’s shoulder.

The last layer of mana surrounding him quaked, and Nico hurtled down into the rubble with a crash. A second later, I landed lightly next to the crater, my defenses already turning toward Cecilia.

The ruined palace burst into motion.

Cecilia, her eyes bulging as she stared down at the crater, her mouth open in a silent scream, took hold of all the mana around us and dragged at it, pulling it to herself. Aether spilled from me in response, fighting to shield my companions from being drained in an instant.

Even as I warded her mana-draining spell, I felt mana condensing as she prepared a second attack.

A flash of bright orange flame drew my eye to Chul's weapon as it flew like a meteor toward Cecilia.

Her many arms of condensed mana whirled around her, stopping the weapon in midair.

It exploded into a golden fireball as a beam of pure mana bisected the crumbling throne room. Phoenix fire and dragon mana whirled, combining into a maelstrom of destructive force, and Cecilia vanished inside the detonation.

Setting my footing, I conjured a second aether blade above my left shoulder, then a third in position to shadow the blade in my hand. Finally, a fourth appeared near my left hip. Aether exploded in sequence throughout my body, driving me forward. With all my concentration, I swung all four blades.

Something impacted against my chest mid-Burst Step. The world turned faster than I could make sense of, and I impacted something hard. I was back on my feet before I'd made sense of what happened, with Sylvie towering over me, one claw supportive against my back.

I winced as the last of the combined magic of Chul and Sylvie swirled into Cecilia's body. She had absorbed it all.

Through Realmheart I could see how her body broke down the lavender-tinged pure mana that Sylvie had projected. The sight sent cold shivers through my body; without a core, the process seemed much faster—almost instant—and much more horrible.

'She can absorb even formed spells?' Sylvie thought, aghast.

Cecilia's hungry eyes drank in the sight of purple-tinged mana flowing over her hand and between her fingers—dragon mana. For an instant, she seemed lost in the sight, almost…amazed.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Chul leap into the air, his fist wrapped in a claw of shaped flames. Cecilia, intent on the mana she'd absorbed from Sylvie, was slow to react.

Blood iron spikes manifested from her shadow as the claw slashed at her throat, catching and deflecting the strike. The heat of Chul's spell cut through the black metal and slashed across Cecilia's jaw as she jerked away. Mana condensed into a battering ram that slammed into Chul and sent him careening away.

Cecilia lifted her hand to her jaw, but the blow had left only streaks of ash across her fair skin.

Nico rose from the crater his body had formed, his staff in hand, all four gems glowing. Blood ran freely from his nose and mouth, and his arm hung limply at his side. And yet, as he watched Chul land heavily on his feet among the rubble, he still had the energy to fly after him, blood iron spikes firing ahead of him like a dozen black arrows.

With a heavy beat of her wings, Sylvie launched into the air, whirled above, and then dove at Cecilia, claws, fangs, and tail flashing.

Resummoning my aether blades, I rushed to support my bond. Bright beams of violet energy hacked and thrust at Cecilia from every direction. One struck her shoulder but rebounded off her natural barrier of mana. Another thrust into her thigh but slid aside. Sylvie's tail batted her off balance, and my third strike landed solidly across her ribs.

The mana gave way, and the aether blade bit into her flesh.

She hissed out a curse, and the ground vanished from beneath my feet. Leaping off a shaky clump of hardened aether, I drove forward with all four aether blades at once, knocking Cecilia back into my bond. Sylvie's claw came crashing down on Cecilia, whose legs gave out as she sank down to one knee.

Bolts of mana burst outward from Cecilia, peppering Sylvie's huge body. I could feel her weakening with each blow.

Chul's battle roar filled the air as I sensed Nico attempting to fly in our direction. I split my attention, hacking and slashing at Cecilia with my conjured weapons with most of my focus but turning a sliver to the battle between Chul and Nico.

Chul was wrestling with Nico in the air, the staff pulled back across Nico's throat. With a downward thrust, he slammed the much smaller Nico into the ground face first, then his fists were wrapped in orange flames as they began to pummel my old friend.

A black spike shot up from the ground and punched through Chul's forearm, but he only ripped it free, turned it point down, and raised it over his head as he prepared to slam it into Nico's prone form.

A bright light swallowed the battleground before the blow could fall.

Sylvie! I shouted in my mind as I felt her mana being dragged from her.

"You should have known you couldn't hold out against me for long." Cecilia's voice resounded through the battlefield as the light dimmed to reveal streams of mana pouring from Sylvie and into Cecilia.

My heart missed several beats as desperation overtook me. The aetheric paths called to me, and I stepped into them.

I appeared between Sylvie and Cecilia. Mana poured past me on all sides, but I didn't release my concentration on the God Step godrune. The lightning-bolt paths remained visible in every direction.

Between Cecilia and me was a nearly impenetrable shell of overlapping layers of mana. So intense was her concentration of mana that it warped even the aetheric pathways, deflecting them so that they bulged out, blurred, and grew difficult to trace.

I listened. Past the hum of mana, the shouts from Nico and Chul, the angry hiss of Cecilia's breath. Through the crackle of flames and the clatter of stones. I listened, as Three Steps had taught me, to the aether's beckoning call.

And I drove the sword forward.

The blade slipped into the pathways, disappearing just above my hand and appearing again inside the shield to slide between Cecilia's ribs.

Her body was moving almost before the blade appeared, and the strike missed her heart.

I pulled my sword back, prepared to thrust again, but something else came with it. I hesitated for an instant, uncertain of what I was seeing. The blade of my sword was wrapped in lavender-tinged mana. Suddenly the blade was twisting around in my wrist, and it slashed across my own ribs. As the mana-wrapped aether struck my armor, Cecilia's mana exploded out of her, hammering my own weapon into me.

I rocked backward, and the blade's edge drove through both my aetheric barrier and the relic armor, carving into the flesh and bone beneath before striking my core.

Nausea ripped the strength from my limbs, so extreme and ever-present that I fell to my knees. The sword vanished, my aetheric barrier dissolved, Realmheart faded, and even my sense of the atmospheric motes of aether around the battlefield flickered in and out.

I pressed one hand against my side; hot blood gushed between my fingers. There was no sudden rush of aether to the wound, no itching warmth as the flesh knitted back together.

I reached for God Step, but there was no glow of response from the godrune on my spine.

'Arthur!' Sylvie screamed in my head at the same time as she unleashed a fearful roar.

Cecilia's eyes had gone wide, blood leaking from the corners of her mouth as it fell open in disbelief. Her hands were pressed to the gory wound in her side where my blade had ripped out from between her ribs.

A blazing creature of fire and light swept past her. I saw only the outline of wings, blindingly bright against the black sky, before a hot claw curled around me and lifted me up, then bitterly warm wind, and we sped away from the palace. The city of Nirmala rapidly diminished behind us as we gained altitude.

Sylvie! I thought desperately, panic writhing in my intestines.

'I'm here!' she practically screamed in my mind, her nerves fried, so weak from the amount of mana that had been taken from her that she was struggling to maintain the draconic form. *'But they're coming, Arthur.'*

I stared through the darkness at the distant palace, smoldering with tiny flames and sending up little plumes of black smoke that gathered in the sky above it. There was a spark in the night, like a shooting star chasing us across the sky. Slower, listing through the air as he struggled to keep up, was Nico.

Chul let out a screeching caw that split the night sky like thunder. “Couldn’t finish the slimy…little…”

A beam of white-hot light split the sky, narrowly missing Chul’s wing. “Can’t…keep…this…up…” he moaned, his voice husky and full of fire.

I reached for the extradimensional storage rune and the tempus warp within, but it didn’t respond.

I fought to calm the wild beating of my heart so I could focus and turned my senses inward, inspecting my core. The wound was deep and bleeding extensively. My sense for aether was rapidly fading in and out, and I could only intermittently sense the particles themselves.

All the aether struggling to heal my body was focused on my core. A bright line had been scratched into the surface by the strike, and my healing aether was slowly filling it in, neglecting the rest of my body as it did so.

“Arthur—can’t…”

My heart flew up into my throat as I plunged downward, Chul—once again humanoid—flipping end over end in the air next to me as my blood rained upward past us both.

A black-on-black shadow closed in on us, and Sylvie scooped us both up in her talons just as another beam of mana lanced past.

‘We’re not going to make it far. Arthur, you’re hurt. Really hurt.’

Lacking the time or energy to explain, I simply let her into my mind as I reached for the aether around my core. I willed it to flow down to my arm, where the spellform for the dimensional storage was. A trickle responded. I pushed again, harder, pleading as I impressed my intent upon the aether. A little more broke away.

The spellform tingled in my flesh.

Cursing, I dragged my forearm across the point of Sylvie's talon, slashing open my own skin.

Another pocket of aetheric particles traveled down my arm.

My mind linked with the dimensional space where my equipment was kept, and I withdrew the tempus warp. Sylvie shifted her claw to pin it next to me.

Shit, I can't activate it, I thought.

Sensing Sylvie's intention, I watched as she shook Chul in her other claw, then pinched him hard even as she dipped beneath a third beam from Cecilia.

Chul gritted his teeth as he snapped back to consciousness. "Gah, what…?"

"The tempus warp!" Sylvie boomed.

His eyes struggled to focus on me, then the device pinned next to me.

"You need to…activate the device…" I choked out, blood filling my mouth as I spoke.

Sylvie moved her claws together, and Chul rested his hand on top of the tempus warp. His mana flowed weakly.

Sylvie gasped as a beam struck her, and we dipped in the air. Her claws loosened, and the tempus warp shifted. I wrapped my arms around it, my head swimming as my wound exploded with pain at the motion and effort.

'She's catching up!'

Chul pushed out more mana, and I programmed the device.

Sylv, transform, I thought, waiting.

Her own thoughts came back to me not in words but in pure disbelief, tinged with the suspicion that I had lost my faculties due to blood loss.

Just do it!

Her head curled around to meet my eyes. Resignation leaked through our connection, and she was suddenly wreathed in mana. The claws around me, Chul, and the tempus warp receded, and Sylvie shrank back into the form of a teenage girl. We fell.

I activated the tempus warp.

A portal appeared in the air below us, and we all plunged through.

On the other side, we spilled across the ground like rolled bones, the tempus warp bouncing several times before crashing into the middle of a rose bush.

Untwisting myself, I stared through the portal into Cecilia’s enraged face as the shining oval flickered out.

16

THE TRUTH OF POWER

CECILIA

I stared at the space where the portal had been, its afterimage still visible against the darkness of the night and the slums below. My mind was blank, the fury of the battle washed away by the shock of its sudden end. Even the screaming pain of the wound in my side seemed subdued, distant as it pumped blood around my hand.

I had failed. Grey had been there, right before me, but I hadn't been able to stop him. I'd let him escape.

I just couldn't make sense of it. I was *the Legacy*. My control over mana was such that I could drag it from the core of a still-living asura, and yet Grey had matched me—had wounded me, even, nearly killed me. If I hadn't sensed the distortion in the mana where his attack appeared, perhaps he would have. Again.

Although I'd only been able to draw in a meager amount of the dragon's mana, it had been enough to offer a spark of insight: Grey could apparently manipulate the interplay between aether and mana, using one force to move and guide the other, even going so far as deflecting or canceling mana-based spells with his aether; and through the dragon's mana, I saw the possibility of the same being done in reverse.

The two forces pushed against one another, and so any application of mana caused some small change in the aether around it. I hadn't understood that before—I barely knew what aether was—but I was starting to see.

But I'd been overconfident. The amount of mana and sheer mental will that had been required to barely move Grey's conjured weapon, even catching him by surprise, had been cataclysmic. Gritting my teeth, I couldn't help but feel like I'd wasted the opportunity. Next time I faced him—and I had no doubt there would be a next time—he'd be ready for it.

At the very least, it seemed clear that Agrona had been wrong to view Grey's core as a mere curiosity. That, or he was hiding just how much Grey's control of aether impacted his plans. I couldn't be sure what he understood, or didn't. A small part of me wished I was intelligent enough to dissect the situation and come away with a better understanding of what Agrona might gain from Grey, Nico, and me, but that kind of strategic thinking had never been my strength.

The gusting wind of Nico's flying spell sent my hair blowing around my face as he caught up to me. My eyes touched his, but I quickly pulled them away, unable to bear the sight of him.

He was pale, his face bloodied and battered, core exhausted, struggling even to maintain focus through the staff that allowed him to channel his spell. Even flying, he favored his left side, where Grey had struck him. He was little more than broken bones and pooling blood held together by bruised skin.

Guilt coiled up from my stomach to wrap like vines around my heart. *Should I have listened to him?* I wondered, already starting to second-guess my every word and action. *Could Grey really help us—do what Nico feared even Agrona couldn't?* I didn't let the thought take root, but instead ripped it out and cast it aside. That was less an option now than it ever had been. The battle had made that clear.

There was a haunted look in Nico's eyes as he inspected me, the uncertainty shining like tears about to fall, like he couldn't quite be sure if I was really there or if he might wake up and I'd be gone.

I’d already grown used to the hard, rage-filled Nico of this world, the one who had gone to war for Agrona, who had killed to bring me into this world. He’d scared me at first, when I was freshly reawakened from the void of death, but it hadn’t taken me long to understand the necessity of his rage, his darkness. What Agrona required of us to earn back the lives that fate stole couldn’t be accomplished by the struggling orphans we’d been on Earth.

Now, seeing the helpless look on his bloodied face, I couldn’t help but see that boy, the sensitive but intelligent young man I’d reluctantly fallen in love with.

But thinking of that Nico only reminded me of the weak, frightened little girl I had been. The years spent foolishly hoping I could get my ki under control as a child, then all that time locked away, experimented on, their training beaten into me every single day until all I could think about was the escape of death…

I opened my mouth and prepared to scream, but the frustration and pain lodged in my throat, and only silence radiated out from me.

Then everything else came rushing back in. The fear, the guilt, the rage, the uncertainty, the hope…but the pain overwhelmed it all. For a moment, I remembered how it had felt to die.

Forcing away the memory, I pressed both hands to the cut and flooded it with water-attribute mana, willing it to heal. But, although I could soothe a fever or the ache caused by long hours of training, I was no healer.

“Cecil, your wound—” Nico started, but he cut off immediately when I waved away whatever he was about to say.

Focusing instead on fire-attribute mana, I burned the gash closed, cauterizing it and stopping the blood loss. It wouldn’t kill me before I could reach Taegrin Caelum and the healers there, and so I put the wound and the pain out of my mind.

Nico cleared his throat. “Guards and soldiers were already gathering outside the palace before we left. I’ll return and inform them of what’s happened. And…I need to find Draneeve, see if he’s still—”

I scoffed. “You’re worried about that shattered, sniveling little creature at a time like this? Vritra’s horns, Nico, we have more important things to… to…” I trailed off as I took in his expression.

Nico’s nose was wrinkled, his brows creased into a frown, and his lip curled up in a disbelieving sneer. “I made him a promise, Cecilia. He helped us—helped you! I—” This time, he cut himself off. Looking away, he dragged in a long, fortifying breath. When he looked back at me, he was calmer. “I’ve treated him terribly. For years. I understand how you see him—how you see everyone else—because I used to be the same. That’s why I want to help him escape this life.”

The weight of his words nearly pulled me right out of the air. I felt my cheeks burn with shame at his chastisement. “I’m sorry, Nico. For not telling you what I’d remembered sooner. I—”

He let out a huffing breath, somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. “Please, don’t apologize to me. It’s not…it’s…” He trailed off. As the wetness in his eyes finally began to fall down his dirty and blood-crusted cheeks in the form of tears, he turned away and began slowly floating back toward Sovereign Exeges’s demolished palace.

The Sovereign…

Balling my fists, I followed. I’d almost forgotten about the Sovereign! It seemed unbelievable—impossible—that Grey was powerful enough to defeat a full-blooded basilisk Sovereign and his entire personal guard, and afterward still have the potency to fight me to a standstill, even with two fledgling asuras at his side.

Agrona needed to know what had happened immediately. A Sovereign had been assassinated, a Scythe killed, and our target had escaped…

It was not a conversation I was looking forward to.

‘You should have listened to Nico,’ Tessia’s voice sounded suddenly in my thoughts.

I had been waiting for her to interject. In fact, I was surprised only that she waited so long.

‘You should have listened to me. *We could be safely in Dicathen right now, far from Agrona and his ambitions. Arthur could help us, I’m certain of it.’*

The wind whipped up by my flight carried my answering snort away. *As if I could ever trust him to do that. Even if Grey didn’t set out to murder me, he still abandoned Nico and me in his hunger to become king. He’s single-minded, has been ever since he was a kid. It seems he wants me dead badly enough that he’s even willing to kill you to make it happen.*

‘He defended himself,’ Tessia countered cooly, her consciousness wriggling under my skin like a parasite. *‘Yet again, you are the aggressor putting him on his back foot as history repeats itself.’* Her voice was silent as a tense pause hung pregnant between us, then: *‘Are you really such a coward that you’ll force him to kill you twice to escape your lives? You’d put that burden on him again, a person you once considered your best friend—someone you used to love, even?’*

A bitter laugh burst from my lips only to melt away in the night air as we approached the ruined palace.

Love? As if. I was a child with a crush on the first person who’d been kind to me. Besides, Grey was never like that—romantic—and he gave up on me the second she *showed an interest in him. Gave up on me and Nico both. But Nico never gave up. That’s why…that’s…*

I swallowed hard. *If you hate me and Nico so much, why help me defend him?* I asked, thinking back to the emerald vines that had erupted from me to catch Grey’s arm and stop him from taking Nico’s head. *You released the elderwood guardian’s power to me, just for a moment. You are so sure that Grey can—that he* would *help us, and yet you know just as well as I do that he was ready to kill us both, if he’d been able.*

Tessia didn’t immediately answer. Her spirit was prickly, like the beginning of a headache.

Scoffing, I pushed back against her. Although I could no longer block her out completely, I could entangle her will in a struggle against my own, forcing her silence. *I’m not ready to die—nor am I going to. I thought I only had one way out before, and maybe in that world it was true. Here, though…*

I followed Nico into the smoking rubble, casually conjuring a stiff breeze to clear the air.

Here, I have the power to change my life's outcome. I may be Agrona's weapon, but only because he is my best chance at getting what I want. When I'm done with this world, I will return to Earth. Not as the Legacy, but as Cecilia, and I will live a quiet and loving life with Nico. I will…

Even as I pictured it, my mind stumbled over the thought. Ever since Agrona had promised to make it so, I had only accepted it as being what I wanted. I'd never asked to be the Legacy, only to be allowed a life. But would the cozy cottage far from the cities, politics, and war of Earth really give me that? Could I sacrifice the power I now had for the life that I'd lost?

To give someone this gift only to snatch it away from them? It was a fate worse than death.

Hadn't those been my own thoughts, seeing Nico's wound? Was it really my heart's dearest desire to give up everything I'd gained from this world, from mana?

Tessia receded deeper within me, pushing me no further. I almost wished she would. Who else could I talk to, if not the voice in my own head?

I pulled back from the contest of wills, no longer attempting to keep her silent. But she was, nonetheless.

Nico was shifting aside rubble where I could sense the faint signature of Draneeve's mana. Shouts were coming from the front of the palace.

"I'll deal with the soldiers," I said softly, biting my lip. When he didn't answer, I left him and flew out through the partially collapsed entrance hall.

A hundred or more mages were already gathered there, although they hadn't breached the palace grounds.

An older man in heavy plate armor and sporting a long, drooping mustache stepped forward. "Legacy," he said, going down on one knee in a bow. Behind him, the entire force of soldiers did the same. He held the bow for a respectable amount of time, then glanced up at me for permission to stand.

I granted it with a nod. “The Sovereign has been assassinated,” I explained, my voice obscured with wind-attribute mana so that only he could make out the words. “No survivors remain in the palace, but you need to get mages in to start putting out the flames so they don’t spread. And prepare a statement for the city to explain the destruction, but do not announce anything related to Exeges. You’ll receive further instructions soon.”

The man’s face had gone slack as he stared up at me, uncomprehending.

“Send someone to prepare the closest teleportation gate to take us to Taegrin Caelum immediately,” I added before turning away.

Flying back through the smoke and rubble, I found Nico leaning over Draneeve, who had been uncovered and was now propped up against the base of a demolished wall, head lolling unconsciously. I was surprised by how normal he appeared.

“He’ll live?” I asked, trying to sound concerned but not feeling I quite managed it.

“I think so,” Nico answered. “But his skull is fractured and there is a lot of swelling. I need to get him to a healer, but…”

“Not in Taegrin Caelum,” I filled in when he hesitated, understanding. “I’ll tell Agrona that he’s dead.”

Nico’s jaw worked silently for a few seconds before he finally spoke. “Be careful. Don’t lie to him if you can avoid it. When I’ve seen to Draneeve, I’ll work with the city’s forces to deal with things here, then follow you.”

I nodded, but he wasn’t looking in my direction. Reaching out, I almost set my hand on his shoulder but stopped just short. *Cursed body*, I thought bitterly before turning away.

When I reached the compound where the teleportation gate was housed, it was already tuned to Taegrin Caelum as I had ordered. The guards let me through without preamble, and I found myself deep in Agrona’s fortress. By the buzz and bustle, it was clear that everyone was aware of what had happened and on high alert, but I also detected a certain amount of confusion in the response. Although I received the customary bowing and scraping at my appearance, I had expected a message or orders from

Agrona to be waiting for me in the teleportation chambers, but no one approached me.

In fact, there was a distinct edge of fear in the way the attendants and soldiers watched me stalk through the chamber, with most avoiding my eye while others visually devoured me, breath bated, like they were waiting for *me* to give *them* orders instead.

I grew more and more tense as I made my way up through the fortress and no one stopped me at all. It wasn't until I started up the stairs that opened into the hall connecting to Agrona's private wing that I started to understand. Above me, someone was screaming and shouting, her rage shaking the very stones.

Before I could open the heavy iron-bound door, it was blown off its hinges just in front of me. It slammed against the opposing wall and exploded into a spiderweb of shattered wood and twisted metal.

The previously ornate hallway was in ruins.

The objects decorating the walls had been flung down, the furniture crushed, the thick rugs tattered and burned. A dragon's horn pierced the wall. Red and orange feathers, now blackened by the flames, had been cast all around, spotting the floor like so many blood stains.

Standing in the middle of this wreckage was Melzri.

Her back was to me. As I watched, she let out a howl and sent crescents of black fire at a barrier preventing her from progressing farther down the hall. The flames crackled against the barrier but hardly even made the mana shiver in response.

She spun around suddenly, her eyes flaring, teeth bared, mana boiling into spells around her hands. "You!" she shouted. She pointed at me, the mana writhing in her grip. "You useless bitch, you were supposed to—"

I waved my hand in front of me like I was brushing away a cobweb.

Her spells winked out. Her eyes bulged yet further somehow, her mouth opening and closing like a drowning fish.

“Where is Agrona?” I asked, looking past her to the barrier.

“He—he won’t…” She hesitated, deflating. “He won’t see me. *Me*. Viessa—dead—but he won’t even *see* me!”

“Is he here?” I asked, still not meeting her eye. There was something so uncomfortable about seeing a Scythe look this *pathetic* that I didn’t want to acknowledge it. “Agrona. Is he here?”

Growling, she spun and lashed out at the barrier again. “How the hells should I know! If he is, he hasn’t shown his damned face.” Gulping in a struggling breath, she screamed, “*Coward*!” at the top of her lungs.

Her voice grated on my nerves, making me wince. Almost without meaning to, I swept the mana from all around her, dragging it out even from her body.

She stumbled as if she’d been struck, looked over her shoulder at me in confusion, and then collapsed onto the ground, unconscious.

I felt a little bad, knowing the backlash she felt when she woke would be truly awful. But at the same time, I hoped I was helping her. Saving her from herself, even. If she did meet with Agrona in her current state, the conversation would not go well. Better she slept through the worst of her grief. I hoped.

The barrier preventing her passage opened like a curtain before me and closed just as easily behind. I passed through the doors beyond, then into Agrona’s private wing proper.

I’d seen only parts of this side of Taegrin Caelum. Agrona had let me come and go as I wished at certain times but had warned me against exploring too thoroughly into his space. It was dangerous, he had told me when I was just coming to terms with my reincarnation, and I was expected to restrict myself to seeking him out directly if I entered this wing.

Extending my senses outward, I searched for his mana signature.

Many sources of mana shone throughout the fortress, some of them even asura, I was sure, but Agrona wasn’t among them.

I’d never known him to be absent from Taegrin Caelum. Certain he was deeper within, his mana signature shrouded by his own doing or some aspect of the barrier he’d wrapped around the entire wing, I pushed forward.

Each room I passed through was plushly furnished and decorated with the spoils of his centuries of leadership. He was particularly fond of the body parts of other asuran races, such as the horns and wing that had, before Melzri’s tantrum, adorned the entry hall. But he seemed to collect a wide variety of portraits and tapestries as well, covering the walls with dozens upon dozens of them.

As I explored deeper into his wing, reaching rooms I had not seen before, I realized there was a kind of story being told. A descent. From light into darkness. It was, I thought, a metaphor for Agrona’s flight from Epheotus, told in portraits and scenery. Recognizing this made me…sad, and for a little while I forgot what I was doing there.

A strangely placed stairwell drew my attention. Although the higher level continued to spread out, this stairwell, which interrupted an otherwise ornate dining room, made such a point of itself that I felt compelled to descend, just like the story the decorations were telling.

The finery of the upper floor was left behind, and I entered into narrow halls of cold stone. The tunnel turned and turned again, intersecting a dozen others like a labyrinth. Doors were inset at odd distances and in unusual locations, and when I thought to check behind one, I found a small room with a single glass orb resting within a narrow indentation in the top of a small pedestal.

I touched the cold glass, but there was no reaction, and so I backed out of the room and closed the door behind me.

Bypassing the next few doors, I tried another at random. The room beyond was empty except for a round grate in the floor, through which a constant trickle of water ran. The water seemed to be coming from the walls themselves, seeping out of the stone.

When I found myself at the end of one branching tunnel, I opened the door to peek within and caught my breath.

Slipping inside, I closed the door behind me, then stared down at the object taking up most of the barren room. It was a table perhaps six feet long and three feet wide. Like before, looking at it filled me with a sense of *wrongness*, like invisible insects were crawling up my arms and legs. Hesitating, I ran my fingers along the grooved runes, just as indecipherable as they were the last time I'd seen them.

It was the rune-covered table I'd woken up on after my Integration.

'I wonder what the runes mean,' Tessia thought, suddenly resurfacing. *'Decipher them, and you'll know what Agrona was really trying to do when you awakened.'*

A sudden bolt of fear hit me, quickening my pulse. I knew in that instant that I'd gone too far. Whatever this table represented, whatever those runes did, Agrona would be furious if he knew I'd found it. Even if he didn't punish me, he'd have the table relocated or even destroyed, I was certain. If he did so, I wouldn't be able to show Nico the runes in their complete form. Nico hadn't gotten far with the trace of mana I'd taken last time, but if he saw the whole system of runes, maybe…

I hurried from the room, making sure the door was shut, and moved quickly down another hallway, then another, putting distance between myself and the rune-etched artifact.

'Slow down, you'll forget where you're—'

So suddenly that I almost screeched, I rounded a corner and found myself face to face with a robed young woman. She jolted away from me so hard that the object in her hands—a round plate of crystal that issued multi-colored light—tumbled from her grip and hit the ground with a sickening crash.

Wind and heat and light filled the hallway. The young woman screamed as the light dissolved her before my eyes.

When the noise faded and the light dimmed, she was entirely gone, and the artifact that she'd been carrying was nothing more than broken shards of crystal on the floor.

"Well, that's a shame."

I spun at the voice, my heart pounding in my throat

“Curious how so many of these old djinn relics are so dangerous, isn’t it? Considering.” Agrona stepped up beside me, looking down at the ruined relic. “Ah well. I’ll have someone down to clean this mess up. Oh, don’t look so distraught,” he added, taking in my appearance.

My jaw was hanging as if it’d been dislocated, and I could feel the blood rushing from my face.

“They’ll be happy not to have to scrape her insides off the walls, you know? A nice clean disintegration. Not even any dust left behind. Quite the feat, really.” Agrona offered his arm, and I took it, my mind numb and lips trembling. “Or perhaps it wasn’t the sudden death of that young—and quite talented, I might add—Instiller that has you so upset. Well, go on then. I imagine you didn’t delve down into my private sanctuary on a whim, Cecil dear.”

‘Protect your thoughts!’ Tessia shouted in my head, filling every corner of my mind.

When I had silenced Melzri and passed through the barrier above, I had been in control of my inner turmoil, ready to face Agrona. Now, I felt scattered and ill-prepared, and Tessia’s intrusion wasn’t helping. But I knew I had to keep my thoughts in order, or he would read me like a children’s book.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed aside all thought of the rune-etched table, the broken relic, the young woman’s sudden demise, and even Tessia Eralith. “I found Grey. He murdered Sovereign Exeges. We fought and… Scythe Viessa and Draneeve are no longer with us.” I stopped, pulling my arm free of Agrona’s, and bowed deeply, struggling to keep calm. “Forgive me, High Sovereign. Grey escaped.”

I waited for a response, but none came. Eventually, I glanced up through the silvery-gray hair that had fallen over my face. Agrona was watching me calmly, his brows slightly raised, the hint of a wry smile on his lips.

“Oh, that Arthur, am I right?” Biting his lip, he extended his arm again, and I took it. “Like a bad egg floating to the top of the pot, he just refuses to be

kept down, doesn’t he?”

I stared up at Agrona, entirely unable to read his mood. Outwardly, he seemed almost…giddy? But I couldn’t trust his outward emotions.

Chuckling at the look on my face, he gave a little shake of his head, setting the ornaments in his horns to jangling. “Allow me to let you in on a little secret,” he said, smiling coyly. “Arthur Leywin—Grey—is doing exactly what we want him to do.”

“W-what?” I asked, unable to stop myself from choking on the word. “But you ordered—”

“Good steel is forged in a hot fire, isn’t it?” he interrupted, wiggling his eyebrows up and down. “You’re a tool, he’s a tool. Tools need sharpening, tempering—gracious, in Nico’s case, the tool needed to be broken down and reforged entirely.”

I swallowed heavily. This was how Agrona operated. Flippantness, sudden switches of extreme personality traits, vagueness…he always knew how to put his opponent off guard. And right now, he was treating me like an opponent.

“Nico nearly died. *I* almost died,” I snapped, stopping to point down to the wound in my side. “If you really are…tempering us or whatever, what are you doing to ensure that we don't shatter?”

Agrona seemed entirely unconcerned as he looked down at the blood staining half my torso. “Would you agree, Cecilia, that battles are won by strength?”

I sensed the trap in his tone, but I couldn’t see it. “And wars are won by the strategic application of that strength. Yes.”

“Not exactly, no. Battle doesn’t consist only of power levels. If that were the case, Kezess—with his vastly greater numbers and resources—would have successfully assassinated me long ago.” Agrona began walking again, and I had no option but to follow. “Regardless of whether you are studying lessers or asuras, there is a universal truth to violent conflict. The factors surrounding a battle—the emotions, interplay of relationships, crossroads

between expectation and effort—are equally important to the outcome as the strength of the combatants.

“While the game of Sovereign’s Quarrel may have a near-infinite combination of moves, you limit the opponent’s range of creativity not by changing the game, but by changing *them*. For example, I was aware that Arthur left Dicathen with a lessuran phoenix in tow. There would be no reason to do so unless he intended to bring this lessuran into battle with him. Dragoth would have been a poor match for such a warrior, and so I kept him where he is, banging his thick, horned skull against Seris’s shields.”

“Viessa’s powers…” I started, then trailed off.

Agrona nodded encouragingly, like I was a toddler taking my first steps. “It's a shame she died, I suppose, but she served her purpose. The lessuran’s impact on the battle was reduced, and even turned into an asset, disrupting Arthur’s ability to focus on you and forcing him to protect his companions while you were not so impaired.”

I felt a cold chill run down my spine. I hadn’t told him any of that; he’d read it in my thoughts.

Agrona was silent for a moment, his eyes tracking across the length of my body. “After all, it seems you were able to absorb some of his dragon bond’s mana, even if only a touch.”

It was too much to absorb while also struggling to keep my thoughts in line. Squeezing my eyes shut tight, until white spots burst behind them, I focused on my breathing. Only after opening my eyes again did I feel confident enough to speak. “So what is it that you—we—want Grey to be doing?”

Pausing, he pressed a finger to his lips and looked up as if thinking. “I’ve never met another who can manipulate aether the way he can. The djinn *knew* more, sure, could work aether in a way that seemed like, well, *magic*,” he said with a sharp laugh. “But they *worked* it. It was a tool to them, bricks in the wall. Do you think Arthur has survived this long because he is… what…more powerful than me? More intelligent than me? Better prepared than me? Oh, Cecil dear…”

He gave himself over to a fit of soft laughter, his body shaking beside mine as we walked through the narrow corridor. “I’ll admit, when Nico and Cadell had him cornered, when they claimed Tessia Eralith to be your vessel, I had written him off, thinking him dead and having no more use for him. But, after the Victoriad…”

I shook my head, unable to decide if Agrona was telling the truth or simply covering up for his mistakes. “But the Wraiths…”

He shrugged, the movement pulling me out of step for a heartbeat. “A crucible. The heat needed turned up, so to speak. An entire battle group of Wraiths was just enough to be decisive. Either they would kill him, or he would reveal his strength. If we’re being honest, I would have been quite disappointed had it been the former.”

But you set me the task of finding him, killing him. You knew…

As if reading my mind—I set my jaw and hardened my will against the possibility—Agrona gave me a concerned, parental look and said, “You and Grey need each other now, Cecilia. You are the hammer, he the anvil. It is where you meet that the truth of power in this world will be revealed.”

17

SCARRED

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Rolling onto my back, I turned away from where the tempus warp portal had vanished. Something nearby was issuing a faint but worrying hum as dim light spilled across the garden: the tempus warp itself. It was glowing faintly and putting off enough heat that it had withered the flowers it had crushed only seconds ago.

I stared at the artifact for far too long, struggling to comprehend. I wasn't really thinking about the tempus warp at all. Rather, my mind was split between the battlefield in Nirmala and the core in my sternum. The artifact was a distracting shroud to toss over the rest of my thoughts. I wasn't ready to start processing everything that had just happened.

There was movement from the corner of my eye, and Sylvie appeared beside me. She couldn't disguise her fear. Her hands pressed against my side, where my own aether blade had sliced through me, driven by the concentration of Cecilia's mana. Sylvie's eyes squeezed tightly shut, and I sensed her mind probing my own, my wound, my core. I could feel her searching for the vivum arts she'd learned in Epheotus, just like I could feel the emptiness of her magic's response.

Her aether affinity had changed. Her insight had been rewritten.

I grabbed her hands, and her eyes flew open, startled. *I'm certain I'll be fine. I just need a moment to heal.*

'But your core, what if—"

"I've healed from a lot worse," I said out loud, a sentiment that was undercut when the effort to speak sent me into a coughing fit, and I spat up a mouthful of blood. "Is Chul…"

"Unconscious," she said softly, her voice tight with worry. "Backlash, I think, from trying to hold his phoenix form."

I nodded. The motion sent fingers of pain clawing through me.

Light flooded the yard as magical spotlights flared from a dozen directions. Wards activated a moment later, shielding the doors and windows of the mansion we'd landed in front of.

It wasn't long, however, before the front door opened and the ward fell again. Darrin Ordin stepped out, draped in a robe and rubbing sleep from his eyes, which shone with a slightly wild light. Clearly, we'd woken him.

He waved a hand, and the light artifacts glaring down on us dimmed, allowing me to make out a number of faces peering from the mansion's windows. "Grey, what's—Vritra's teeth!" he breathed, rushing across the yard to my side. He looked from my wound to my face, then to my companions, and finally back, his own face pale. "Come on, let's get you inside, that wound needs—"

"No," I said, forcing myself up to my knees. "I'll be okay. Just…need a moment."

My mind moved inward, focusing on my core. The cut across its surface was swarming with aether; the violet particles pressed into the scratch, where they compacted before melting into the surface of the core. All the while, aether poured out of the core as well, fueling the slow healing. Only a trickle returned as the atmospheric aether gravitating toward my armor before being drawn into the wounded core for purification.

The strike to my core had been indirect, the resulting wound not enough to pierce the hard exterior. It had been a long time since I'd felt the fear of

injury; this brought it back in full force.

If she had managed a more direct strike, my core might have been crippled.

‘Absorbing my mana must have given her some small insight about the interaction between mana and aether,’ Sylvie replied, biting her lip. *‘I’m not sure I quite understand what happened, though.’*

Beside Sylvie, Darrin’s eyes stayed on my side, where the blood continued to flow.

She wrapped enough mana around my blade that she was able to force it back on me. I was confused, caught off guard, and when the second burst of mana went off, driving the blade through me, I reacted too slowly.

I felt a sudden cool comfort in my side as, bit by bit, aether began to trickle away from my core to my wound, stitching together the muscle, bone, and internal organs. The flow of blood began to slow.

Around my core, most of the aether had filled in the scratch, although the healing had left a faint scar behind and consumed most of my aether. The scar itself itched, more a referred sensation in the back of my mind than on the surface of the core itself. I couldn’t pull myself away from it; like a soldier staring at a freshly healed wound in the mirror, I mentally prodded the scar tissue, leaning into the discomfort as I tried to understand it.

Only when the lacerated skin of my side began to heal over did I turn away from the scar, instead tentatively reaching for my godrunes. Not to activate them, just to ensure they were responsive. Aroa’s Requiem tingled on my spine, then Realmheart burned and brought into sight the atmospheric mana surrounding us. They worked as expected, although both were…*heavier* than they should have been.

I’m tired, and my core is nearly empty. Sighing, I released the channeled aether and closed my eyes, allowing myself the time necessary to heal.

I heard Darrin return to his home, likely to inform the children what was happening. Sylvie left my side to check again on Chul, her concern lingering in the back of my mind through our connection.

By the time my wound was healed, I felt well and truly exhausted. I couldn't remember my core being so strained in a long time, and certainly not since the formation of its third layer. I would need time to recuperate and absorb aether—much more than the meager atmospheric aether available here.

Easing myself to my feet, I opened my eyes and looked again at the tempus warp.

The hum had subsided, as had the glow of leaking mana. As I pulled the artifact free of the ruined garden bed, I realized that it was warm to the touch, and there was a fine crack running down the side of the hammered metal. Curious, I used my meager supply of aether to channel the mana required to activate the device. The scar's itch grew more pronounced.

The tempus warp responded to my efforts, but it shed light at even that minor application of mana.

"You won't get more than a use or two out of that now," Darrin said, reappearing in his yard in a simple traveling tunic and breeches. When I looked at him, he nodded at the tempus warp. "They only last so long, even the powerful ones like that. Not sure I'd trust it at all with that crack in it." Smiling, he held out his hand, and I took it firmly. His gaze lowered to where my armor had sealed back over the gash. "Glad to see things weren't as bad as they looked."

"I'm not sure about that yet," I muttered before catching myself and returning his smile half-heartedly. "Sorry to have stirred up your home. This was the only place I could think of given the situation we were in. But we can't stay long. I just need to get my companion back on his feet and—"

"Grey—Arthur, there are things you need to know," Darrin said, his voice low and urgent, his expression tense. "Alaric is here. Wasn't woken by the perimeter alarm, of course, the old drunk, but he should have crawled out of bed and put on a pair of trousers by now. Before you run off, you should hear what he has to say."

Darrin's serious delivery gave me pause. After a moment's hesitation, I nodded.

After retrieving the tempus warp, we hauled Chul's unconscious body into the house and laid him out on a couch. I left Sylvie to watch over him, and Darrin sent his many wards back to their rooms, including a frustrated Briar.

When we entered the study, Alaric was already there and had, of course, already poured himself a drink. Behind him, just where I'd left it, was the active ascension half of the Compass, humming away in merry ignorance of all that had transpired since the last time I'd used it.

Alaric eyed me warily as I sat down across from him. The exhaustion was pressing in on me from all sides, but I could tell the grizzled ascender was just as tired as me.

"Old man," I said.

"Pup," he replied with a snort. Taking a fortifying drink, he sighed and dug his palm into one eye socket. "So, can I assume it is your return to our fair continent that has kicked up such a shit storm?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms.

Alaric threw up his hands, somehow managing not to spill his drink. "What do I mean, he says." He glanced at Darrin, who only shrugged. "Pushback, boy. Counter-offensives. Highbloods turning on us. Armies springing out of Agrona's puckered sphincter to retake cities he'd given up on. I'm talking about months' worth of gains lost in a week."

Darrin was staring down at his hands. Alaric's bloodshot eyes were narrowed as he glared past me into the distance. They were both exhausted…and frightened, I realized.

"Tell me more," I said, leaning forward. "Seris should know what's happening."

Alaric scoffed and drained his glass before launching into a bitter but detailed explanation of the many losses the rebellion had experienced just in the last week.

Seris's force had never been large enough to stage armies and make direct attacks against the Sovereigns; they had relied on Seris's control of Sehz-Clar to maintain any kind of footing. Outside of Sehz-Clar, the fighting had largely happened in the shadows through spies and agents that Alaric and his connections organized. After Seris had retreated to the Relictombs, much of the active work of the rebellion had gone underground. Due to the actions of a few brave highbloods, however, they had gained and kept control of a handful of cities in Truacia, Vechor, and Sehz-Clar.

Those cities had been essential staging grounds for other efforts, primarily provisioning. According to Alaric, attempts to retake the cities had been minimal, with the rebellion forces scoring a handful of unexpected victories in the weeks after Sehz-Clar's fall.

But in a span of days, these cities had fallen, the highbloods in control either calling on their troops to stand down or being executed by loyalist strike teams. To make matters worse, Alaric's network of connections, informants, spies, and operators was being targeted and assassinated.

"And not one by one, but in fucking droves," he moaned, his cheeks ruddy beneath his unkempt beard. "I've had to send my folks running for the hills to hide out. It's hard to make sense of, boy. Like someone threw a Vritra-damned switch and unleashed a flood of death."

We continued on for a while, Alaric delving into more specific situations while I listened and attempted to digest it all. In return, I explained what Seris and I had planned and told them about the events of Nirmala.

Shortly before dawn, Chul woke, and he and Sylvie joined us despite my protestations that he should continue to rest.

"I've rested too long. This body itches to redeem its pathetic display during the fight," he said, crestfallen.

"You were matched poorly," Sylvie chimed in. "Had you faced any other Scythe, you would have—"

"No, he's right," I cut in. "It was pathetic—but so was I. Best thing we can do is learn from it, own our mistakes, and get stronger."

Grinding his teeth, Chul posted up in the corner of the study and glared around for the remainder of the conversation.

The rolling fields visible out the study window were just turning from black to orange-gray with the first rays of dawn's light when we were interrupted again.

A sudden and rapid banging on the study door made us all jerk around, but before anyone could call for entry, the door burst open and Briar rushed in. "Master Darrin! A broadcast—quickly—from Agrona!"

We all exchanged a wary glance, then hurriedly followed her to a sitting room outfitted with a large projection crystal. A sweeping image of the Basilisk Fang Mountains was speeding by across the crystal's surface. When I stepped into range of the telepathic field, I heard a wakeful, nervous voice in my head: "…repeat, a mandatory message from the High Sovereign himself will be played in two minutes. All Alacryans must listen. I repeat, a mandatory…"

I stepped back out of the field and gave Darrin a curious look.

Frowning, he shrugged. "Enforced broadcasts aren't unheard of, but they're pretty rare. We didn't even get one after what happened at the Victoriad."

"The projection artifact just activated itself and started babbling about the mandatory message," Briar added, her arms crossed as she glared at the projection.

"So, a message from Agrona Vritra himself," Chul mused as he stepped in and out of the telepathic field. "If only I could punch his evil face through this crystal artifact."

Alaric's brows rose as he gave Chul an amused look. "I'm starting to see where his strengths and weaknesses lie."

I smiled faintly. "If only we could, Chul."

We all waited in silence until the repeating message stopped and the scene melted away.

A face appeared across the crystal projection.

“It really is the High Sovereign himself…” Briar whispered, a shiver running through her.

Agrona appeared austere, but his severity was somewhat undercut by the glittering ornaments in his horns. He stared out at us from the projection crystal for several seconds before finally speaking.

“My people of Alacrya,” he began, his words purposeful and clear, “children of the Vritra. Today, I speak to you directly…to each and every individual among you. Listen closely and carefully, because my words are for *you*.”

He paused again, and I glanced around the room; a handful of the teenagers were present, as was Darrin’s housekeeper, Sorrel. They looked spellbound, all of them. Only Alaric, Chul, and I seemed able to keep mental distance from what we were seeing. Even Sylvie was wide-eyed, her lips parted slightly as she became wrapped up in this vision. But I could sense her emotions and some of her thoughts, and hers was a very different reason for being so invested.

‘My father…’ she sent to me, feeling my mind touch hers. *‘I can’t help but wonder. It still seems so unlikely. What could have brought Sylvia Indrath and Agrona Vritra together?’*

Even through the projection, his force of personality was clear. If there had ever been a time before Agrona Vritra had given himself over to his cruel and sociopathic impulses, perhaps it was then that Sylvia had fallen for him. Or perhaps he had always been the same but had fooled her into seeing something that wasn’t there.

I carefully scanned Sylvie’s rapt face.

Agrona didn’t shy away from manipulating even those closest to him, after all. Through a spell implanted in her egg before she was born, he had been able to inhabit her body even from across the ocean. It had been a revelation that had nearly broken trust between Sylvie and me. I could only hope, now, that her death and rebirth had severed this connection, but it worried me that we had no way to know for sure.

“For months now, this continent has been divided by the strife of rebellion and civil war,” Agrona continued. “Rest assured, I hold no ill-will toward those of you who have participated in this conflict. Such a contest of wills, whether it be between compatriots, generals, or even Sovereigns, will only ever strengthen you as a people in the long run. Conflict is necessary to grow in power.”

He paused, his scarlet eyes seeming to stare right into mine. “But strife at the wrong time can also weaken us all, and this is why I am speaking to you now. The gates of Epheotus have been thrown open, and dragons have marched through. Already, they’ve countered much of our work in Dicathen, undoing the good you and your blood have fought for, *died* for. But their violence doesn’t extend only to that distant continent. They’ve shed blood right here in Alacrya, at the heart of Etril.”

Agrona’s expression hardened, his eyes blazing like fire. “A dragon has assassinated Sovereign Exeges before fleeing like a coward in the night. Thousands of witnesses saw the asura wheeling above his palace, breathing down mana and death. A hundred or more palace staff died with him, helpless against such an onslaught—regular Alacryans, burned to dust only for the crime of working in support of a different clan.

“The war between Alacrya and Dicathen is over. And so too must be this conflict between every loyal Alacryan and the supporters of Seris the Unblooded. The dragons are intent on taking over both Dicathen and Alacrya. The same beings that invented the lie of asuran godhood—those who have long hidden away in Epheotus and offered only judgment on those who they call ‘lessers,’ providing no aid of provisions or magic, whose attacks on this continent created the Vritra’s Maw Sea and ended a hundred thousand lives—have now decided to take everything you and your blood ancestors worked so hard to build.”

In the silence that followed, the only sound was Chul’s disbelieving huff.

“Due to the interference of the dragons’ ally, Lance Arthur Leywin—”

I blinked, caught off guard by his mention of me. Several people in the room turned to glance in my direction.

“—I was unable to prepare Dicathen for this eventuality, but I *will* protect Alacrya and all who still call themselves loyal Alacryans from the invading dragons.” Agrona’s chin was raised, his voice growing louder and more proud as he spoke. “*With* your aid, of course. This continent must stand strong, united under my authority. Past is the time of Scythes and Sovereigns, the dominion of the Vritra clan. Now I, Agrona, shall personally guide you through the dangers to come.”

His expression softened, and he offered us an understanding smile. “No punishment will be dealt to any who participated in this rebellion so long as they lay down their arms and return to their lives immediately. But, as I can accept no internal discord that will weaken us in the face of this enemy, all those who refuse will be dealt with immediately and with prejudice. Call on your bloods, your neighbors, and your friends to set aside their petty grievances for now. Tomorrow, we take a step forward as a nation. Unified.”

Agrona set his jaw and gave a subtle nod of his head, making the ornaments in his horns sway and sparkle. Then the projection faded, and the crystal went out.

Silence followed. Slowly, the children turned to look at Darrin, but he was looking at me. Alaric’s gaze was on the floor, a scowl etched into his wrinkled skin. Chul was also watching me, as if taking his cue from my reaction, but Sylvie had moved away, her back to the room and her mind closed off.

“Go on, you lot,” Darrin said after a minute. “No training or chores today. Go enjoy yourself.”

Briar snorted. “Go stew in our existential angst, more like.” But she, like the others, did as she was told and shuffled out of the sitting room.

When the housekeeper didn’t immediately follow—she was still staring forward at the projection crystal, a stupefied expression on her pale face—Darrin rested his hand on her shoulder. “Sorrel?”

She jumped, one hand flying to her mouth to hold back a weak scream. “S-sorry, Master Ordin. E-excuse me.” She got shakily to her feet and hurried from the room.

As I watched her go, I considered Agrona's message. Not so much the specifics of it, but the intent. How it would affect people. The regular people like Sorrel.

"Interesting that he called you out by name," Darrin mused. "Aligning you with the dragons will help him to turn any popularity you've garnered in Alacrya back against you."

"But why would your people support this snake over the dragons?" Chul rumbled, running his hand through his orange hair, making the darker shade coil and shimmer like smoke. "My clan bears no love for the tyrant Indrath, but he is not worse than Agrona."

"The devil you know," Alaric answered, his voice a low, tired growl. "What better way to make people forget how horribly the Vritra have treated them than the threat of life under the bootheel of another asura clan. And *you lot*"—he pointed at my chest with a wrinkled finger—"gave them the perfect little piece of propaganda." He shook his head and tumbled into a chair, fingers kneading his temples.

"At least this explains the sudden reversal of our fortunes," Darrin said, worry clear in his features as he watched Alaric. "Agrona must have been planning this move for some time. The assassination of…well, wait a moment." He gave me a confused look. "So, he's blaming Exeges's death on the dragons, an easy enough thing to do even if you hadn't taken an actual dragon to the palace to assassinate Exeges…but who actually killed the Sovereign, then?"

His focus moved to Sylvie. "Lady…ah, forgive me if this is an imprudent question, but is it possible it *was* your…blood? Kin? The other dragons?"

Sylvie shrugged and shook her head at the same time, making her wheat-blond hair bob around her horns. "I don't know for sure, but…it didn't feel like a dragon had been there."

Darrin's gaze shifted back to me. "Then who, do you think?"

His words were like chum on the churning surface of my thoughts. I had no more idea who could have killed the Sovereign than I had when we'd first

found the corpse, but I felt certain we were only missing some small detail to help us put the pieces together.

Why does this mystery draw my mind back to the missing third keystone?

'Do you think they're linked?' Sylvie thought back. I could tell from the tone of her thoughts that she wasn't convinced. *'Like…some third party who happens to be moving along the same path we are?'*

Sighing, I took the seat across from Alaric and ran a hand down my face tiredly, struggling to think around the scar's itch. "I don't know," I said, answering both Sylvie's and Darrin's questions at once. *It's possible*, I added mentally to Sylvie.

I gasped, drawing wary looks from everyone except Sylvie, who was following along with my thoughts as I had them.

"All right, Arthur?" Darrin asked.

"Yes, just…never mind," I said, knowing I couldn't explain my thoughts to Darrin.

Your dream savior from the Relictombs, the voice you heard. Your rebirth and change in aether affinity, the fact that you existed to save my soul before you were born. That's potentially created some kind of paradox, right? What if there really is *a third party? With aevum arts involved, it could even be us, moving through some parallel timeline or…*

I trailed off, feeling Sylvie's thoughts pushing back against my own.

'The simplest explanation is often the most accurate,' she said, quoting some scholar we'd both learned about at Xyrus Academy. *'Maybe I'm wrong, but the relic, the Sovereign, and my savior don't* feel *connected. For the sake of argument, though, if we went back in time somehow to claim the relic, then where is it? And if you were set to kill Exeges, why go ahead of yourself and kill him? Because you were fated to fail?'*

Not me, but…you. Despite her arguments, I was starting to see the picture more clearly. *When your insight into the aevum branch of aether becomes deep enough, maybe you can go back in time and claim the relic. If the battle against Exeges proved too difficult, Cecilia might have gotten the*

upper hand against me afterward. And…what if the voice you're hearing is your own, messages sent back through time?

Sylvie considered for a moment, watching me closely. *'Have you ever heard of an aether art that allows you to go back in time?'*

Aroa's Requiem can turn back time, I pointed out.

'That's not the same, though. Like, at all.' She gave me a pointed look.

What about your time on Earth, then, watching my life? What was that if not time travel?

She pursed her lips, her skepticism only growing. *I couldn't make changes, though. You never even knew I was there.*

I'm reaching, I admitted, leaning back in the chair and heaving another sigh. *Spiraling, even.* "The simplest explanation is often the correct one," I repeated out loud.

Darrin looked up from mulling his own thoughts. Alaric scratched his beard but kept his eyes on his belly. Chul cracked his neck and paced across the room.

"But to kill a Sovereign—a full-blooded asura—is no simple task. There is, however, a short list of those who could have done so." I held up my fist, all my fingers curled inward. Raising my index finger, I said, "Another Sovereign."

"Or a dragon," Sylvie said, and I lifted a second finger.

"The Wraiths are trained to kill asuras," I said, lifting a third finger.

"You?" Chul said, stopping and cocking his head to the side. "But then, I know it wasn't you. Hm. The remaining members of my clan gave up long ago on being warriors, but this Exeges did not seem so strong to me, either. Mordain or one of the others could have killed him, maybe."

Nodding, I lifted my little finger.

"Agrona," Alaric grunted. "Or his pet Legacy. Reports from one of my folks on the front lines at Sehz-Clar said the unnatural bitch can suck the

mana right out of you."

I let my hand fall as I considered what he'd said. My eyes touched Sylvie's as I pictured Exeges's corpse. *Ashen, taut skin, sunken appearance, blind colorless eyes, like the blood had been drained from his body…*

"But Cecilia seemed just as surprised to find the Sovereign dead as we were," Sylvie said, thinking out loud. "If she…drained him of his mana, she acted her part well. Maybe Agrona was willing to sacrifice Exeges to give Cecilia a power boost for her fight with you?"

Quietly, I sensed Sylvie hoping this was the case, and that Cecilia hadn't truly been strong enough to fight us to a standstill all on her own.

I stood suddenly. "We don't know, and we're getting no closer to answers here. We need to return to Seris." I shot a guilty look at Darrin and Alaric. "I'm sorry. I wish I could offer more, but…"

"No need," Darrin said, clapping me on the arm. "My home has no direct connection to the rebellion. I'm simply a retired ascender training a few kids. As for Alaric…" He shot the older man another wary look. "He's not really here. And if he was, he's certainly not connected to Seris's plot. And if he is, I had no way of knowing that. We're just old drinking pals, after all."

I started to leave the room but was compelled to stop and offer one last piece of advice. "Do what he says. Stop fighting. Send your people home. Let me and Seris take things from here. In a war between dragons and basilisks, you'll be crushed."

Alaric scoffed. "Your fault I got dragged back into this in the first place. You and your connection to that Scythe. Bah. But I suppose you're right. Never too late to retire for the third time, I suppose."

I smiled, grateful. "Goodbye."

Darrin gave a small wave, but Alaric only wrinkled his nose and resumed staring down at his stomach.

I left, my companions on my heels, and returned to the study where the Compass was still waiting.

I paused before it, considering.

“We can’t leave it here again. With the tempus warp nearly defunct, we might need the Compass with us. Moving through the Relictombs is the best way to avoid Agrona’s and Kezess’s perceptive gazes, and might be our only way to get between Alacrya and Dicathen moving forward.”

“Any ideas?” Sylvie asked, her hand brushing the field of energy surrounding the relic.

“And can we be certain that Lady Sylvie won’t have another fit?” Chul asked, unsubtly looking at her from the corner of his eye.

“Here’s hoping,” I breathed. “Go through. I’ll be right behind you.”

Sylvie bit her lip. Chul just shrugged and stepped directly into the portal. When I nodded for her to follow, Sylvie hesitantly did so, vanishing into the shimmering oval hanging in the air.

Reaching out, I felt the shape of the portal with my aether. Activating my core sent a deep, thrumming ache throughout my entire body, and intensified the itching sensation from the scar.

There was a familiarity to the portal’s aether that had nothing to do with my having used it before. Curious, I activated God Step, seeing the pathways without stepping into them. A confident smirk split my face.

Continuing to channel God Step, I focused entirely on the portal, listening to its specific resonance among the many other points all around me. When I was certain I had it, I grabbed the Compass and deactivated it.

The effect was immediate. The portal itself began to press inward against my will, but the point in space that connected to the lightning-bolt pathways sang to me just the same. Waiting only long enough to secure the Compass in my dimension rune, I stepped through the hole.

18

A CERTAIN STATE IN TIME

THE MATTE black cube rested on the bed in front of me, its weight pressing down into the surface of the soft blanket. It was heavy, dull, and frustratingly *blank*, lacking any indication that this was some repository of great insight. Had I not received it from the last djinn remnant, as well as already having worked through the long and frustrating process of unlocking the first two keystones, I might have given it up as some aether-rich broken relic and simply absorbed the power.

Sylvie was sitting at the foot of the bed with her knees tucked against her chest, gaze distant as it passed through the cube to focus on something very far away. She shifted slightly, a frown pulling down the corners of her lips. She had been troubled ever since the broadcast, although she had kept her feelings close to her chest.

Our journey back to the second level of the Relictombs had been relatively uneventful. Sylvie hadn’t experienced a repeat of her first foray into the Relictombs, which had allowed us to fly through the giant-tree zone and directly to the exit portal. A contingent of Denoir soldiers had been waiting for us, along with my sister. Ellie had proved a bit of a conundrum for the highbloods, as no one knew where she fit into their strict caste system, allowing her to do whatever she wanted—which apparently included pestering and bossing around entire squads of highblood battle groups.

Our reunion had been short-lived, however, as I'd rushed to deliver my news to Seris. That conversation, too, had been brief, as she had asked for time to consider what this meant for our plans. Grateful for that, I'd retreated to a room in the Dread Craven to rest.

After an hour of quiet meditation and absorbing ambient aether, I had found my mind too cluttered to be restful, and so, as I often had since being rewarded with the very first keystone, I found myself intent upon a djinn relic as a way to focus my mind.

Now, staring down at it, I had to wonder what I had hoped to accomplish.

Unlike the first two keystones, I couldn't even fully enter this one. When my aether imbued it, I felt myself pulled inward like before, but instead of transitioning into the aetheric space—represented previously by a sort of wall of purple energy—I was pushed back.

The frustrating itch from my core only seemed to make focusing more difficult.

Acknowledging the scar made the itch worse, and I couldn't help but focus on it, my mind digging into that itch like fingernails.

Aether no longer lingered around the wound. Aside from the scar, my core seemed to have healed completely, and I hadn't sensed any effect on my ability to channel or store aether. But that didn't make the itch any less irritating.

Releasing a small amount of aether from my core, I scratched at its surface to relieve the itch, but this did nothing. The sensation didn't feel like it was in my core, after all, but in the back of my mind. The worst part was, I couldn't tell if it was an actual physical sensation or just a thought that wouldn't let me go.

I cycled more aether, pushing it out and reabsorbing it, a building desperation to scratch the itch swelling in my chest, laced with frustration that the wound had left behind this scar, like a memorial to my failure. Despite taking many wounds, some of them much more grievous, I'd never been left with lingering pain or discomfort. Not since my discovery of aether.

‘Maybe focusing on it is just making it worse?’ Sylvie suggested.

I had twin flashbacks to memories from both of my childhoods when my mother and Headmaster Wilbeck patiently explained that scratching my irritated skin would only make the itching worse in the long run.

Sighing, I pulled my mind away from the sensation. I needed to be intentional, purposeful in how I thought—or didn’t think—about it. And so I forced my concentration back to the keystone.

Settling my mind into a calmer place, I activated Realmheart and began attempting to manipulate the aether of the keystone in a variety of ways. Directly imbuing aether into it drew my mind toward it, but I was rebuffed without ever entering the interior keystone realm itself. Poking and prodding at the inherent aether and mana within the relic made the internal structure quake in an uncomfortable way, like I was at risk of breaking it, but did nothing to open it to me or reveal its contents.

“Not sure why I’m so worried about breaking it. It’s like it’s already… broken…” I trailed off, realization wiping away my frustration and replacing it with a sudden wary excitement.

Sylvie’s frown deepened and she sat up straighter, watching me silently.

The scar on my core itched again as I activated it, pushing mana into Aroa’s Requiem. Aetheric motes spilled down my arms and jumped to the keystone, buzzing over the matte surface before being drawn into the relic. Closing my eyes, I let my mind flow with them, and again I was pulled inward. Darkness extended before me, full of distant pinpoints of light.

Then I was shunted uncomfortably back into my own body.

“Did you feel that?” I asked, too excited to be disappointed. “Something was definitely different that time.”

Sylvie shook her head and scooted slightly closer. “But why?”

“The godrune lets me sort of…push time through an item, turning back the clock on something that is broken.” I considered the exit portal from the snowy zone where I’d met Three Steps and the other Shadow Claws. Then I remembered the visions of a potential future I’d seen when attempting to

unlock insight into that first keystone. “Whether because of my own failures in understanding or some natural limit due to my affinity with spatium aether arts, I couldn’t master it, not the way I did Realmheart. There are…limitations.”

Still, I was eager to keep trying now that I’d made some progress—or at least thought I had.

Activating Aroa’s Requiem again, I let the amethyst motes gravitate toward the keystone on their own, not controlling them directly. I purposefully held my mind back, not wanting to be drawn into the keystone only to be forced out again, which would prevent me from tracking the godrune’s progress.

Aetheric particles buzzed over the keystone, some sinking into it, but only just below the surface. I felt them hanging there, suspended, almost trembling with suppressed purpose as my intention overrode the particles’ natural inclination.

I felt certain that Aroa’s Requiem was the key, but some keys turned differently than others.

My intent, I realized. Just as I had to purposefully consider the scar in a certain way to keep it from burrowing through my conscious mind, I had to channel the godrune with a specific intent as well. Because it didn’t simply allow me to fix a static object, but to manipulate the way time had worked on that object.

That was the key. The relic wasn’t broken or in need of fixing, but perhaps it had to be aligned with a certain state it had been *in time* to open.

“Ingenious,” I muttered, wondering at the djinn mind that had created such a puzzle.

Feeling myself beginning to grin, I adjusted the way I was holding the godrune in my mind, and started pushing the channeled aether through the keystone. I envisioned it not as repairing some broken internal component, but rather turning back the hands of a clock, setting a series of cogs into motion within.

As these metaphorical cogs turned, I put pressure on the relic, trying to ease into the keystone realm within.

The room went dark again. And slowly, very slowly, the dark gave way to plum purple, then light pink, and finally I found myself before a wall of amethyst energy.

It had worked, but I was not drawn through the aetheric barrier, nor could I push myself into it.

But I knew now what needed to be done. There were four keystones. Each was needed to progress my understanding of the aspect of Fate. Since Aroa's Requiem had brought me to this point…

With my mind entangled within the keystone, channeling aether into Realmheart took time. My connection to the godrune felt distant and tentative, but I was certain about my course and so never doubted what I was attempting to do.

Dozens of white lines of pure mana appeared in my vision, spilling out of narrow gaps in the barrier, invisible without sight of the mana particles.

Leaning forward, I drifted into one of the gaps. It carved through the aether like a maze, but by following the trail of mana, I easily passed through and appeared within what I could only describe as an aetheric lightning storm.

Violet clouds of aether burst with bolts of hot white mana with a noise like shattering glass, the crashing flashes coming one after another with sickening frequency. Within moments, I felt my temples begin to ache and burn, my consciousness already being drawn out of the keystone realm and back toward my body.

I gritted my teeth and leaned into the sensation, forcing my way forward.

A bolt of mana struck me, and my mind lurched to a memory.

"It's okay. I'm okay, Art."

Tessia's voice. Gentle. Her hands, a soft caress…

I sank to the cold, hard floor. Sobs ripped from my throat. Head resting in Tessia's lap.

Her hands were warm, keeping me anchored, her voice like a healer's magic, easing the pain…

A second bolt struck me from a different direction, and suddenly, the emotion was gone, leaving me hollow as I considered the ramifications of colliding technology and magical advancement, pondering what Dicathen might look like in three, four, even five hundred years.

Flash.

Bile rose up in the back of my throat as my mind was yanked to the memory of a lecture on mana beast differentiation while I'd been at Xyrus Academy.

Flash.

Eight years old. A maid standing in the doorway of a noble estate, looking down at me curiously.

"Hello. My name is Arthur Leywin. I believe my family is currently residing in this manor. May I speak to them?"

A familiar voice in the background: "Eleanor Leywin! There you are! You have got to stop running to the front door every time someone…"

My mother's eyes, wide, her words stopping mid-sentence, a bowl tumbling from her hands.

In front of my mother, a little girl, dazzling brown eyes gazing up at me with innocent curiosity, ash brown pigtails on each side of her head.

Bolt after bolt struck, jerking me from one random thought, memory, or consideration to the next until it felt like my skull would split down the middle.

I let go, and the keystone realm hurled me out. My eyes snapped open, stinging with sweat.

Sylvie was right next to me, a cloth in her hand, futilely attempting to wipe my face. "There you are. I was worried sick. You went blank for a while, like your mind was totally empty."

My heart was pounding in my chest, and the ache behind my eyes was still very much present. *Sorry*, I thought, my throat too dry to speak comfortably. *It was…different, this time. Painful.*

“What did you see?” Sylvie prodded my mind, and I opened up to her, drawing the events within the keystone forward. “Oh. I see.”

It’s a lock, I think. To move past it, I need the insight contained within—

“The missing keystone,” Sylvie said aloud as I thought it. She shook her head. “I assume you’ll be prioritizing finding it, then?”

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. “Looks like it.”

“Maybe you should go for a walk?” Sylvie suggested, passing me the damp hand towel. “I’m sure your sister would like to speak to you for more than a couple minutes.”

‘You could come visit me, you know,’ Regis's voice intruded from across the zone. *‘Just because I’m stuck in a head in a jar and you can telepathically communicate with me from across the Relictombs doesn’t mean the gesture wouldn’t be appreciated. Plus, I think I might be turning into a pickle here.’*

I smiled despite myself and worked my fingers against my chest. Beneath the skin, my pulse was already beating slower, but this only brought my attention back to my drained core and the itching scar across its surface. The feel of it wiped the smile off my face.

“Yeah, I better check in on everyone,” I admitted, stretching as I stood. “Coming?”

Sylvie shook her head before flopping down in the space I’d vacated. “I’m sorry, Arthur. What I learned when we first stepped into the Relictombs—and with our fight now—I feel like I need some time to process it. These powers don’t quite feel like mine yet. I just need some time to consider everything.”

“I can help if you want,” I said, not really wanting to leave the room yet myself.

She gave a small shake of her head. “I was planning on making Regis help me. As my sounding board, I guess.”

‘Sweet, something to do,’ he thought to both of us.

Understanding what she meant, I tousled my bond's hair—to which she responded by slapping my hand away playfully—and left the small room.

One of the servants was standing at the top of the stairs, and when they saw me appear they hurried over, bowed, and said, "Lady Seris has stepped out but wanted me to inform you that she has come to a decision and would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you at your earliest convenience. She asked that I not disturb you, but wait until—"

I held up a hand, cutting them off. "Thank you, I appreciate that. Message received."

They bowed and hurried away, vanishing down the stairs.

I followed more slowly, checking the rooms around mine for Ellie, Caera, or Chul, but they weren't present. The taproom below was empty as well, except for a couple of guards. Two more stood outside the door, but they didn't say anything as I passed. I considered asking about the others but realized almost immediately I didn't have to.

A crash resounded through the city, and I could sense Chul's mana from halfway across the zone.

Following the noise of repeated concussive bursts, I passed beyond the boundary of the ascenders' neighborhood and found myself in an open park, the green grass bright beneath the faux open sky. Fruit trees dotted the park, providing shade for tables and chairs where a handful of highbloods—their station clear from their clothes alone—sat and played Sovereign's Quarrel.

A burst of mana shook the leaves in the trees from not far away, drawing looks of ire from the concentrating highbloods.

Following the street that ran past this park, I soon found myself at a small outdoor arena. Half-moon stands wrapped around a sunken fighting pit surrounded by a protective field of mana. A few dozen spectators had gathered, filling in the stands in little groups to watch as Cylrit and Chul faced off against one another in the arena below.

The two men stood slightly apart, Cylrit speaking deliberately as he repeated a motion with his arm, showing Chul something. I wasn't

surprised Chul had sought Cylrit out for training and sparring. When considering them purely on scale of power, Chul—a half-phoenix—far outstripped the Vritra-blooded retainer, but Cylrit was still likely the most powerful fighter in Seris's force, and he'd been actively fighting a war while Chul was hidden beneath the Beast Glades living the life of a pacifist.

I kept back, half-hidden around one end of the stands, not wanting to interrupt the two warriors but curious to see them spar.

Imbuing aether into my ears, I heard Cylrit continue, "As for…'burning yourself out like a blazing candle,' I see what you mean. Your body is powerful, and because you know you can exhaust your mana quickly, you lean into that, pushing yourself hard at the beginning of a fight. And yet this only leads you to burn yourself out even more quickly.

"Your instincts for battle are strong; don't doubt yourself in that regard. However, you rely on them heavily. To an enemy powerful enough to stand up to the raw strength of your first onslaught, this will make you predictable. You need study to augment instinct so that you are able to vary your tactics, especially as you seek to become more efficient as well."

"That's what I'm doing," Chul said with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

Cylrit nodded. "Of course. Now, let us exchange a few more rounds. I want to see you put the strike I showed you into practice."

Chul fell back a few steps and Cylrit slipped into a defensive stance, his hands up, his gaze focused. Chul jolted forward, his fists snapping out in a series of crushing blows. Cylrit used minimal force to deflect the blows, letting Chul's own force aid in the subtle shifting of Cylrit's footing.

They paused, and Cylrit offered a correction on Chul's follow-through, then they repeated the exercise again. Letting my enhanced hearing abate as the noise of their sparring increased, I couldn't make out the conversation and instruction passing between them, but I saw how quickly Chul adjusted and improved. There was an intentional focus to his training that I hadn't seen from him before.

His embarrassment at the hands of the Scythe, Viessa, seemed to have been the evidence he needed that his lineage alone wasn't enough to bring him victory. Despite being more than twice my age, even considering both my lives, Chul was in many ways just a boy. His mother had been captured, imprisoned, and killed by Agrona, while his father's entire race had been exterminated by Kezess. He pictured himself a righteous avenger. I could just see him fantasizing about charging from the Hearth to single-handedly defeat both Kezess and Agrona, claiming justice for his people.

I didn't have to imagine how he had felt when he realized that wasn't going to happen.

They shifted their training, Cylrit putting Chul on the defensive and having him block a series of increasingly powerful blows. After a few minutes, Cylrit even drew his sword, forcing Chul to defend bare-handed, the bursts of mana from each exchange sounding like thunderclaps that rumbled throughout the zone.

For some reason, seeing Chul so focused helped me relax. Although I'd been too self-absorbed to acknowledge it, I was worried what the aftermath of our defeat would do to him mentally. Him showing such mental fortitude seemed like the best-case scenario, meaning I had one less thing to worry about. I left the arena with a smile, my mind turning to Caera and my sister.

It took longer to find Ellie. She wasn't at the ascension portal, and none of the guards stationed there had seen her. Lauden of Highblood Denoir offered to send out a search party, but I assured him it wasn't an emergency and continued on my own.

Ellie's pure mana was unique, but it wasn't as visible as the show put on by Chul and Cylrit, and I couldn't sense it from as far away. In the end, it was something else entirely that led me to her.

As I made my way down Sovereign Boulevard, using Realmheart to search the mana, I nearly walked right into Mayla, who was carrying a basket full of fragrant food.

"Professor!" she said, doing a little skip of excitement. "I've been hoping to run into you since I heard you were back. I…" She hesitated as my gaze

slipped away from her to scan the street. She turned to look over her shoulder, frowning. “Is something wrong?”

I rubbed the back of my neck, forcing a smile. “No, I’m just looking for my sister. I—”

“Oh!” Mayla bobbed up and down on her toes. “Sorry; of course. That’s actually where I’m going now. Scythe Seris suggested we train together—Seth, Eleanor, and me—and we have been while you were gone. She’s *voracious*, your sister. Barely stops training, but then…” She gave me an uncertain look. “I suppose that makes sense, considering.”

I held out a hand, offering to take the basket, and Mayla handed it over. “Can you take me?”

Mayla’s face lit up like a lighting artifact. “Of course! I think we’ve just about become what you might call ‘friends’ while training together. Even Seth has loosened up a bit about the whole Dicathian thing, but…” She hesitated, suddenly insecure. “I figured it might make this place just a bit more…well, fun, y’know? And Ellie seemed pretty open about hanging out with Alacryans, even if hanging out has only ever been training, really…”

I frowned, and her eyes widened.

“I hope we didn’t overstep! Maybe you didn’t want her to make friends with Alacryans—”

“No, I’m glad to hear she’s had people here.” I didn’t voice that I’d felt guilty about leaving her and Caera, despite understanding that it was the best decision. “She’s always had a lot of eyes on her. A lot of pressure, with…me being who I am.”

“I can’t even imagine…” Mayla lost focus, her gaze downcast, then suddenly snapped back to the moment. “Right, Ellie. She’s this way!”

As we walked, Mayla kept up a constant stream of small talk, explaining the research she and Seth had been helping with, at least as best as she understood it. She awkwardly danced around the subject of my presence in their lives being the reason for their unusually potent bestowals.

“Being honest, though, I’m actually pretty ready to, you know, go home…” She shot me a quick glance, gauging my reaction. “I don’t want to go to war in Dicathen. And I *really* don’t want to fight *dragons*.” She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself.

I thought back to Agrona’s message. Would these people really be spared his wrath if they simply agreed to lay down their weapons and go home, putting this entire uprising behind them and abandoning what they’d hoped to gain? It was difficult to picture. But surely even Agrona wouldn’t punish kids like Mayla and Seth for being dragged into this all without even understanding what was happening.

My thoughts caught on a snag.

Even if they weren’t punished, they’d still end up at war with Epheotus. Mayla was a Sentry, and a potentially powerful one. How long would it take before she ended up right where Seth’s sister had? Agrona might not punish her, but he *would* burn her as kindling in his conflict with Kezess, and he’d never even know he’d done it.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” I said after too long a pause.

A short hike later, we reached a guarded compound. The mage at the gate seemed to know Mayla by sight and let her through without question. He considered me for several seconds before seeming to make up his mind and waving me through into the outer courtyard.

I heard Boo’s low moan and the *thunk* of mana arrows before I saw Ellie. Her arm was wrapped in a glowing cast of mana, her bow drawn, a mana arrow conjured against the string. A shooting range took up the right side of the courtyard, while large doors opened into the rest of the compound. A strong hum of mana came from within, and many mana signatures milled about throughout the building.

Boo looked up and grunted. Ellie glanced at me over her shoulder, her brows pinched together in a small frown, then turned back to her target and released the arrow. It split into multiple arrows mid-flight, each of which struck a separate target before exploding in controlled bursts of mana that sent up a cloud of debris.

Seth, who had been sitting against the nearby wall with his eyes closed, flinched and nearly toppled from his bench. He grinned in embarrassment as he opened his eyes; seeing me standing next to Mayla, the grin slipped away.

I raised my hand in greeting, remembering the last time I'd seen him. I didn't blame him for being upset with me. After all, one moment I'd been his professor—his mentor, even—and the next he'd watched me fight two Scythes before vanishing from his life without a word. And that was before he knew I was an enemy of Alacrya.

"Hey, look who I found!" Mayla said, her chipper tone sounding slightly forced as she took her basket and hurried over to the others. "And, um, I brought the food, too."

Seth gave me a stiff nod as he took a couple of rolls filled with meat and cheese. He immediately shoved one in his mouth, staring down at the other as he chewed.

Boo looked at Ellie and growled something.

"I'm not hungry yet," she said, firing off an arrow that spiraled into several beams of light that flashed rapidly, making them difficult to look at.

Boo growled again, lower this time.

"No. I need to keep going. My arm feels fine," she shot back, an edge of anger creeping into her tone.

Mayla glanced from Ellie to Seth, then gave me an uncomfortable smile. "Um, anyway, Ellie's been able to tell us all kinds of stuff about your continent. It's been pretty…interesting…" She trailed off as I approached my sister.

Laying a hand gently on Ellie's arm, I said, "El, if even Boo is saying so, then it's probably time for a break. You're going to hurt yourself—"

"I can handle it," she snapped, releasing the held arrow. It fizzled and missed its target, bursting harmlessly against a stone wall. Grimacing, she drew and fired a quick shot, making the arrow bend and twist through the air so that it struck a different target.

I watched quietly, my focus on her broken arm and the strain she was putting on it each time she drew her bow. As she shot, I realized she was also activating her spellform to push and pull mana throughout her body in an exercise to strengthen her control over it, something Lyra said would be essential to fully utilizing the spells it granted her.

Clever, I thought, pride intermingling with worry.

Watching my sister push herself so hard only reminded me of the many ways in which I had failed. *My most important goal in this life was always to keep my family safe.* It was hard to argue that I'd done that as I watched my wounded sister practice killing our enemies.

I glanced at Seth and Mayla, who were sitting on the bench eating in silence. Mayla looked away too late, trying to act as if she hadn't been listening intently.

Taking a step closer to my sister, I turned my gaze on the targets out in the distance.

"I couldn't do it," I said quietly, afraid to see her expression. "I couldn't save her."

There was a pause before Ellie fired another arrow. "Yeah, I figured."

She shot another, then another. The pulses of mana from her spellform swelled significantly, and then…a tremor ran through her. An arrow vanished from the bowstring, and even her cast seemed to falter, the mana fading in and out around her broken arm. She gasped in pain, and the bow slipped from her grasp to clatter onto the ground as she sank to her knees.

Boo moaned and rushed over to her protectively, pressing his nose into her hair and snuffling. Gold light flowed from him, suffusing Ellie.

Mayla and Seth were both on their feet. Mayla had one hand over her mouth, while the other clutched Seth's in a white-knuckled grip. Seth was chewing on the inside of his lip and looking nervous.

I reached for Ellie, but she batted my hand away with her good one. "I can do it myself!" she snapped, clutching the broken arm to her stomach. Slowly, mana oozed into shape around it, recreating the cast. From the

sweat on her brow and the way her shoulders trembled, though, I knew she was in incredible pain.

“El, let me—”

“I said I got it!” she yelled, pulling back and glaring up into my face. “What’s the point, anyway?”

She fell back onto her rear and curled her torso around her arm, tears welling up in her anger-filled eyes. “We’ve had to sacrifice so much, endure *so much*. You’ve had to leave me and mom *all the time*, and we still can’t even save the people we love!” Her voice grew louder and more raspy with each word until she was shouting. “I want Dad back! I want Tess back. I want my *brother* back!”

All I could do was stand there, letting Ellie’s emotions wash over me. “I’m just…so *mad*. And I feel so *helpless*. I can’t do anything myself, can’t change anything! No matter how strong I get, I’ll never be strong enough to make a difference in a war where even *you* can lose a fight. And that scares me, Arthur—it *terrifies* me.

“Sometimes I wish we all still lived in Xyrus—or even Ashber—just some regular rural kid like any other girl my age. I could just look up at this great figure named Arthur Leywin and know deep down that he was going to protect me and everyone I loved—solve all our problems—and I could leave big important matters to powerful people like him. But I *can’t*.”

She stared into my eyes, her jaw working as she clenched her teeth. “Because that same person is my brother, and I see how even the powerful people all around me are struggling, and I know it might not be enough—they might not be enough—*you* might not be enough—and so I have to do something, but I’m just never going to be strong enough for it to matter…”

The words spilled out of her until she had no more breath, and then she deflated, struggling to breathe, trying and failing to keep herself under control.

As I reached for her, Seth appeared next to me before easing down in front of Ellie. Mayla sat beside her, wrapped an arm around her, and rested her

head on Ellie's shoulder, heedless of the huge bearlike mana beast hulking over them.

"I…understand what you're going through, Eleanor," Seth said haltingly. "And you're right. About it all. Vritra, but I miss my sister. And I used to think just the same about her, you know? I…" He paused, clenching his jaw to hold back his emotions before speaking again. "I don't think I've ever felt as helpless as when the news came back that she'd died. I hated you Dicathians for that, and I hated the highbloods and the Vritra clan for sending her. But…I think I hated myself even more. She'd been so set on getting me the healing I needed—I've always been sickly, frail—and I thought maybe she wouldn't have volunteered for such dangerous assignments if it weren't…well, you get it."

Ellie had gone quiet. Whether because they were her peers or just not her brother, she seemed more ready to accept the comfort they provided in that moment.

"Professor Grey…" Seth cleared his throat. "Um, Arthur…your brother… he was the first person who made me feel seen, like I was worth something, since Circe died. Like someone actually cared." He shook his head, an amazed smile on his face. "And then I learn he's not even *from* this continent. It really knocked me for a loop, you know?"

He sat in silence for a moment, then seemed to remember he had been speaking. "Anyway, my point is that you never know who'll have power in your life, or whose life you'll impact. Maybe you're not as strong as a Scythe or Sovereign. That doesn't have to be how you change the world. Maybe…maybe you're just kind to someone." A flush suddenly crept up his neck to his cheeks. "I don't know, I just…well, I just wanted to tell you you're not alone."

He reached out and patted her hand awkwardly before standing up and taking a step back. Tentatively, he looked at me from the corner of his eye. I smiled appreciatively, and he looked back at the ground.

I started to speak, wanting to add something—anything—but I caught Boo's eye. The guardian bear gave me an empathetic nod, and I understood what

he meant. She was going to be okay. What needed to be said already had been, and Ellie was in good hands.

Returning his nod, I turned and left.

19

A CAGE OPENED

ASCENDER-TARGETED shops and inns passed by on either side as I moved without purpose along the main thoroughfare. I was pulled back to my first foray into this microcosm of Alacryan culture, each aspect of it so hyper-focused, remembering the thug's ill-thought-out attempt to mug me, my run-in with "Haedrig," and my eventual—unfortunate—pairing with the Granbehls.

It's a shame this all was built under Agrona, for no reason other than his own search for power, I thought, mentally comparing ascender culture to the adventurers of Dicathen. *This place could have been truly great*. Even as I thought this, however, I realized that the idea behind the ascents was too far removed from the djinn's original intention to bring any real insight into the Relictombs' inner workings.

After all, one didn't study a book by ripping the pages out of it.

Recognizing the melancholy of my unfocused thoughts, I intentionally shifted back to the next task on my list.

Seris was ready to speak to me. It had felt important to see my companions first, however, and although I hadn't run across Caera, I knew it was past time to learn what Seris had planned for her people.

After checking back in at the Dread Craven, the fortified inn turned base of operations for Seris herself, I received directions from a guard to a particular tower Seris often retreated to when she needed to think but didn't want to disconnect herself from the people under her care.

I was surprised when I found the tower in question, which I had expected to be some wealthy highblood's status symbol or perhaps an intimidating guard tower. Instead, I found a plain silo tucked away in the farthest corner of the zone amidst buildings that would have looked more at home on the first level among the industrialized areas.

A bare metal staircase spiraled up the outside of the seventy-foot-tall structure, and I could sense Seris's mana signature on the top, stationary.

The metal rang and creaked as I ascended, and when I crested the flat roof, Seris was watching me. She wore dark, flowing robes and a distant expression. At first, she didn't say anything, only waved me over to where she stood looking out over the Relictombs.

Taking her cue, I didn't speak, only took in the view as she did.

The Relictombs looked different from up here. The faux sky couldn't quite maintain its illusion when you could see the entire zone spread out around you, looking more like the inside of a painted dome than the sky itself, the edges not quite aligning properly with the ground and buildings.

Except for a couple of parks, nearly the entire zone was built in, giving it a condensed, claustrophobic air from above. Even the highblood compounds looked small and cramped from this angle, their size and grandeur a carefully constructed illusion.

My thoughts must have shown on my face, because Seris's gaze slowly swept across the city as she said, "Like a mana beast enclosure, painstakingly designed to disguise the fact that its residents are, in fact, penned in a cage."

I knew she was talking about more than just the Relictombs; it was the Alacryans' entire way of life that penned them in. One illusion of choice layered atop the next, thoroughly caging them all while simultaneously making them feel free.

“What does it look like if you open the cage doors then?” I asked, leaning against a railing that wrapped around the silo roof.

“That’s what I intend to find out,” she answered. Swaying slightly, she shot me a chagrined half-smile and eased herself down onto the cool metal, holding onto the rail for support. “I had hoped to allow my strength to fully return, but…”

I sat down beside her. “Agrona’s message.”

“Yes.” She stared out at the zone for several seconds before continuing. “His offer—and ultimatum—will put pressure on those who support my cause—the ones who aren’t already in the fold here, especially. But the cracks are formed, the wound dealt. Alacrya has seen gods bleed and beg. This will fester in their minds and hearts, and later, when a choice must be made to die for their High Sovereign or live for themselves, more will choose themselves than would have otherwise.”

We watched as a man in the black and crimson uniform of a Relictombs clerk exited one of the nearby buildings through a back door. He eased the door closed behind him then leaned against the wall, sinking down it as his body, tiny in the distance, racked with sobs.

“The Legacy is, it turns out, exactly what Agrona said she would be,” Seris said softly as she watched the man in the distance, her expression curious but not uncaring. “I had thought, perhaps, that Agrona hadn’t sent her to the Relictombs yet because he didn’t want to have her fail so publicly yet again, but now I think I understand his true reason.”

When Seris didn’t immediately continue, I prodded her gently, saying, “What do you think his true intentions are, then?”

“I’m afraid that the division of Alacrya has played into his hands,” she said severely. “I suspect that he wished for this portal between our world and Epheotus to be opened. We have helped to make him look vulnerable, ensuring that the dragons finally came into play.”

“But that’s what you wanted, right?” I said, recalling her speech to the highbloods about their grand purpose. “Agrona and Kezess are each working to outmaneuver the other. Meanwhile, we have to figure out how

to make sure our people—both the Dicathians and the Alacryans—survive the coming war."

She picked at her fingernails as I spoke but froze when she seemed to realize what she was doing and slowly lowered her hands. "It will be important that they both continue to think they have the upper hand, yes. I know Agrona as well as any, but you understand Kezess Indrath far better than I do. Do you think he can be convinced to limit the scope of his war against Agrona?"

"He wants something that, for now, only I can give him: deeper understanding of aether." I paused, watching as the crying man in the distance stood, wiped himself off, and went back through the door he'd appeared from. "As long as he can keep me friendly with minimal effort or sacrifice on his part, he'll do it. But I have no doubt that, as soon as the equation shifts, he'll just as quickly betray any promise he has made. No, he can only be relied on to do what will get him closer to what he wants."

"Agrona and Kezess are much alike in that way, then. Despite any shreds of wisdom these asura may have gained over their long lives, their inherent selfishness and self-assuredness is a weakness we will have to exploit. For example, I am now firmly convinced that Agrona is intentionally pitting you and Cecilia against each other. It would seem foolish to us that he risks his greatest asset in skirmishes with you, his strongest adversary outside of the asuras themselves, but Agrona is a scientist at his core, and he operates on a timetable of centuries, not days. What is a few months of civil war or tens of thousands of lives lost to such a being, if he can learn something new about mana—or aether?"

"She said something about him wanting my core," I remembered. "I guess I finally got his attention after all."

Seris drummed her fingers across the metal railing. "Kezess wants to drain the knowledge from your mind, while Agrona wants to dissect you and see how you work. Not an enviable position. But I'm trusting that you are strong enough, or will become strong enough, to handle the pressure. And it does give us an opportunity. If Agrona is going to keep sending the Legacy after you, it means we will have another chance to defeat her."

My mind was forced back yet again to my battle with Cecilia. Despite the small insights I had gained, I knew bigger steps were required. No, not steps—leaps. It was now necessary that I find the third keystone as soon as possible and gain insight into the godrunes contained in both the third and fourth keystones. It could no longer wait, and nothing else took precedence.

Only…

There was so much else to do, so many people who were relying on me to protect them. Like all the people currently trapped in this zone.

Even though the Alacryan loyalist forces under Dragoth had so far failed to penetrate the shielded portals cutting this level off from the first, I couldn't be sure that Cecilia wasn't capable of doing so. All I knew was that if anyone could, it was her. Which meant, as Seris said, that Agrona had chosen not to send her here, allowing the situation to continue despite potentially having the means to stop it.

Just like in Dicathen.

We lost the war to an army composed mainly of slaves and unadorned soldiers. It had only taken the involvement of a couple of Scythes to ensure our defeat. Agrona's Wraiths—even a single squadron—could have demolished our continent in a week, and not even the Lances would have been able to put up a fight against them. He had the means, but instead he'd created a sense of conflict, allowing us to imagine ourselves in a battle that we could win, when the reality was anything but.

We hadn't been lambs to the slaughter. We had been fish in a net.

"Optics," I muttered.

Seris nodded as she closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose, supporting herself with one arm. "Yes, I think so too. A carefully choreographed stage play, although not for our benefit. I won't give him more credit than he deserves, however. I don't imagine your appearance and actions at the Victoriad were part of his grand design. I've never seen him so angry as when you vanished out from under his very nose."

I smiled, and Seris gave a small laugh. She wobbled slightly as she did, and the laugh died as quickly as it had come. She shifted to the side, trying to

get more comfortable, and so I turned as well, putting my back against hers.

She went stiff, clearly caught off guard, then slowly relaxed and eased into me so that the weight of our bodies was supporting one another.

“I won’t blame you for our current situation, but I could, you know,” she said, wry humor lacing her words.

I looked up at the blue sky, watching the atmospheric aether move to its own strange whims all around us. “That’s what the retainer Lyra thought. That you’d started the rebellion to force Agrona’s eye homeward and give me time to retake Dicathen. Do you regret it, knowing that’s probably what he wanted?”

“No,” she said without hesitation. “As I said, we’ve wounded his image. Optics, as you said. Even a small wound can change the course of entire future battles. And I can’t let you take such credit either, Arthur Leywin. I only adjusted things forward; I didn’t invent this entire movement for your benefit alone.”

I chuckled, my shoulders moving against Seris’s. I could feel each of her breaths move through me, but we were both comfortable, relaxed. That was strange. There were very few people I could have had this conversation with and felt so at ease. It was hard to imagine that I had once watched her rip the horns from a retainer’s head—a retainer who had defeated Sylvie and me together—as easily as pulling the wings from a fly.

The landscape of the world’s power dynamic had changed significantly since then, or at least my place in it had.

Hasn’t it? I thought, suddenly unsure. Was my growth and success just more dancing to Kezess and Agrona’s tune, or was there something else to it?

‘It’s Faaaaate…’ Regis intruded suddenly, the word drawn out like it was spoken by a ghostly apparition.

No, I thought back firmly. *It is me, my own doing, my own strength. My control over aether—and my status as a quadra-elemental mage before that—wasn’t some machination of gods or fate or anything else. I worked to*

achieve it, built my strength in a way perhaps no one else in this world could have, I…

Trailing off, I considered my own thoughts. I had only been able to utilize all four elements because I had been reincarnated with my previous life's memories intact. And although it had been my own force of will that had forged the aether core, I still didn't really know how I'd ended up in the Relictombs in the first place. Looking at it like that, it was hard to disavow any influence of some power beyond my control, even fate…

Regis gave me the mental equivalent of an appreciative nod. *'Damned right. Although, you have had a pretty good support structure, which has allowed you to get the most of both your natural abilities and the opportunities presented to you. For example—'*

I know, I thought, biting back a small smile. *I've never lacked purpose, and much of that has come from those around me. My family.*

'Ah, shucks,' Regis thought back, reading the intention behind my words just as easily as hearing the words themselves.

Seris shifted against my back, tensing slightly. "But now, Arthur, it is I who need *your* help. Because I have decided what my people will do next."

I waited, giving her the time she needed to formulate the words.

"All my designs for the Relictombs have failed. And even if they hadn't, I can no longer be certain of keeping the Legacy out when Agrona finally decides to unleash her on us." She took her time, breathing deeply, considering her words before she spoke. "I'm not ready to destroy the portals. It strikes a blow against the very people I work to help as well as Agrona. Future generations may rely on this place in ways we can't yet comprehend. And so I'm retreating from the Relictombs."

I had expected this. Regis's assistance in holding the shields was a temporary solution at best. Besides, without constant supplies from the first level and the outside world, no sizable population could live in the second level for an extended period of time. "And that's where I come in?"

"Although I will force no one to follow me out of here, I will take anyone who wishes it to Elenoir, to the wastes where you have banished the

Alacryan soldiers in Dicathen.”

I took a moment to digest this, careful to hold back my immediate judgment. Inside, I was loath to invite yet more Alacryans to Dicathen’s shores, even these ones. But my willingness wasn’t even the biggest problem. “And you want me to help settle this with the dragons.”

“Exactly,” she said with a sigh. “I need you to speak on my behalf. Convince the dragons—Kezess himself if you must—to allow it, but not only that. It may be that Agrona decides this is definitive and moves against our people in the Elenoir Wastes. The dragons’ protection is also needed.”

I half turned around, looking at the back of Seris’s head, which was leaning forward. I got the impression that her eyes were closed. “This move also puts you in position to build an alliance, maybe even some good faith. It would even bring you a step closer to Kezess’s ear, which is necessary if you intend to continue feeding the conflict between the two.”

Seris’s weight vanished from my back as she stood. The wariness melted away as she looked down on me imperiously, and I saw again the woman who had saved me from Uto so long ago. “I intend to help you do so, Arthur.”

After getting to my feet as well, I was the one looking down at her. “What do we need to do then?”

“Here,” I said, handing Cylrit my tempus warp.

He looked over the repaired exterior housing before setting it on the ground next to the one Seris had brought herself—the only two allowed in the Relictombs zone, as they posed the largest threat of intrusion from the outside. “You were able to fix it?”

The crack was sealed, and physically it was in fine shape; I had used Aroa’s Requiem on it in preparation for the journey. What I couldn’t manage, though, was replacing the magic that had been expended from within it.

After this, the anvil-shaped artifact would be little more than a chunk of metal.

I explained, and he nodded as if he'd expected this. "No wonder. The devices themselves are not made so much as reclaimed from pieces of old djinn relics like the teleportation portals. They are finite, like the dimension artifacts."

I blinked in surprise, not having known this. Mentally, I made a note to get Gideon and Wren a tempus warp so they could confirm what Cylrit had said.

Having done as Seris asked, I bade Cylrit a temporary farewell and retreated to a less crowded section of the courtyard.

People teemed around the arrival portals, which were still being disrupted by Seris's artifacts, powered by Regis. Although Seris had briefed me on exactly how many people were present in the second level, it was still startling to see them all in one place. They spilled out of the courtyard into the alleys and side streets, and well down Sovereign Boulevard.

Most appeared afraid to varying degrees. The less well-off folk—universally employees or business owners who had been trapped here when Seris blocked the zone off from the Relictombs' first level—were largely clustered around the disruption array. They were kept back by the many battle groups of mages that were guarding several highbloods who were also queuing around the portals.

Rumors had started to fly almost immediately when Seris announced that people were to gather their belongings, packing up whatever they could take with no plans to return. Combined with the rumors floating around about Agrona's broadcast, many people instinctively believed Seris was standing down.

Seris herself had visited the highlords and matrons of the present highbloods to explain her plan and make sure they understood what was being offered.

"A new life, one outside the Vritra clan's strict hierarchy of blood purity, a culture we can build for ourselves that doesn't run on the blood of our

strongest and weakest," she had explained to Corbett Denoir only the day before. "Let me be clear what I mean by this. When we reach Dicathen, the notion of highbloods, named bloods, and unblooded all ceases to hold any meaning. We will all have to work together to build toward a society worth living in. The luck of your birth and the standing of your blood in Alacrya will carry no weight, no power, where we're going."

Lenora's face had gone pale, but she had stepped forward first, holding her hand out to her husband. He took it as he joined her, chewing his lip before saying, "We've come this far, Scythe Seris." He shot a glance to Caera and then to me. "I've no interest in crawling on my belly in front of the Vritra clan, hoping for the High Sovereign's leniency. Highblood Denoir is with you."

Caera had shaken her head, her jaw slack as she looked at her adoptive parents as if she didn't know them. Now, she stood by them proudly on the opposite side of the courtyard among the rest of their blood who were in the Relictombs.

I hadn't listened in on all of Seris's conversations, but I knew not all of them had gone as well. Highlord Frost was furious at the retreat to Dicathen, seeing it as admitting failure and abandoning what they'd set out to do. Matron Tremblay, on the other hand, showed little emotion as she expressed her intent to accept Agrona's forgiveness and return to her newly formed highblood instead of leaving behind her home.

"Can't blame her exactly," Kayden said, pulling my gaze away from where Matron Tremblay and all her people were gathered close to the portals. "For most of these highbloods, this 'rebellion' was a way to elevate themselves by removing the Vritra. For others, they hoped to claim the continent for us, the *lessers*. The idea of leaving Alacrya for them is like leaving an essential part of their identity behind."

"But not you?" I asked, watching the crowd carefully. Part of my role in all this was to ensure things didn't boil over between the two opposing groups: those following Seris and those staying behind.

He shrugged, a perfectly executed motion that expressed both his lack of passion for his homeland and disdain for a political structure that he had

actively retreated away from when he became a professor at Central Academy. “In the context of our world, Alacryan is little more than a term for a human with the taint of Vritra blood. Not sure what they think there is to be so proud about, to be frank.”

Regardless of whether they were staying or leaving, both sides were desperate, their decision made more with hope or fear than logic. Only, those leaving Alacrya with Seris were afraid to return to their previous lives and hopeful for better ones in the future, while those who were prepared to take Agrona at his word and give up on the rebellion feared Agrona’s wrath and hoped that his offer was true.

Ideally, we would have had weeks to prepare. Messages should have been sent to Lyra Dreide and Vajrakor, or even Kezess, and shelter and provisions prepared for the new influx of refugees to the Elenoir Wastes. But we hadn’t had weeks. No, Seris had allowed her people only a day and a half to prepare.

Carts and crates, mana beasts and self-pulling sledges, anything that could be used to haul goods and provisions had been dragged or driven to the courtyard’s outskirts as servants, soldiers, and ascenders worked around the clock. But they weren’t the only ones. Already I was seeing Seris’s vision put into practice as highlords and ladies alike rubbed elbows with the lowest members of their houses in order to be ready in time.

Seris floated into the air near where she had arranged to set up the tempus warps.

A man in fine clothes near the exit portals—a named blood shop owner, by the looks of it—shouted something unkind, and a scuffle broke out as an older mage with dark bags under his eyes took exception. Several bystanders were quick to step in and prevent the fight from escalating, but as my attention slid off the scuffle, it landed on another scene, practically hidden by the thronging mass of people.

Mayla and Seth hunkered together beneath the balcony of one of the large buildings bordering the courtyard. Mayla had her arms wrapped around Seth, the top of her head pushing his glasses up and to the side. She

trembled with suppressed sobs even as she reached up to give Seth a peck on the corner of his lips.

I looked away, not wanting to intrude on their private moment. Although I hadn't spoken to them since the conversation with Ellie, I could guess what was happening. Mayla had a family back in Etril, a sister—a reason not to leave the continent, in other words. Seth's family, though, was all gone, victims of the war and the destruction of Elenoir.

"Listen, Alacryans and friends," Seris said, her voice projected magically so that all could hear her words, even the farthest away easily making out her crisp enunciation. "I will not burden you with a long-winded speech. I will not insult you with pleas or threats. Your will is your own, each and every one of you. If ever there was a purpose to our act of rebellion, it is that."

The Relictombs were quiet in response, the crowd hanging on Seris's words like a lifeline, even those who weren't following her.

"For those of you returning home, accepting and hoping for the grace of the High Sovereign, I wish you only health and hope. See to your families. Defend yourselves in whatever way you think best." Her dark eyes swept the crowd, power oozing from her and making those closest step back. "I will not judge you for it. Many of you did not join this long siege of your own free will, and to those of you, I offer both my apologies and my thanks for suffering these last two months with grace.

"I offer my thanks as well to all those who follow me forward, stepping out from the High Sovereign's yoke and daring to imagine what a world beyond the conflicts of the asura might look like for us." She let a small smile soften her severe expression. "It will not be a safe road, or an easy one, but the path will be of our own choosing."

No cheer went up when Seris stopped talking, no eager shouts or chanting. The attitude of the crowd was split between a melancholy-tinged eagerness and wary readiness.

At some unseen signal from Seris, the two tempus warps were activated, creating twin portals that opened beside each other into Dicathen. Seris drifted down in front of the portals, and she was the first to step through. Several clerks and officials in her employ began guiding the crowd in a

kind of controlled chaos. Cylrit monitored the portals while a dozen battle groups lingered in the courtyard to keep the peace.

Moving blood by blood, the Alacryans marched through.

On the opposite side of the courtyard, all those who wouldn't be traveling to Dicathen lingered. We couldn't deactivate the shield disruption array until everyone else had gone, and then those people would be on their own. I could only hope that Agrona would be true to his word and they would be allowed to return to their lives. There would be nothing stopping Dragoth and his forces from cutting them down otherwise.

I noticed Highblood Denoir lingering, not among the rush to be the first through the tempus warp portals, then caught sight of Caera snaking her way against the current of the flowing crowd. Matron Tremblay met her in the middle, and they exchanged a few words. Although I couldn't hear, I knew that Caera was making one more plea for Maylis to come with them, but the matron only shook her head.

Leaning forward, the imposing matron knocked her horns against Caera's, smiled, and turned away.

Chul and Sylvie lingered around me, watchful and silent. Ellie, eager to be involved and still embarrassed about her outburst, was rushing about making herself helpful wherever she could, whether that was calming a frightened child or leading a mana beast toward the portal to help one of the less populous bloods.

My own mind was strangely quiet as the exodus proceeded. It took hours, during which many of those staying left the courtyard, doing their waiting in a more comfortable environment. Since nothing was needed of me, I only watched, keeping myself separate. This was their journey, after all. I was an outsider.

Once most of the people were through, Seris's soldiers and a group of ascenders hauled stored provisions through, and those staying began filtering back. Ellie went through with a contingent of mages hauling magical items, throwing me a look that very clearly said, "I'm sorry" and "I'm okay" as she vanished.

Once the very last of Seris's people had passed through to Dicathen, Cylrit deactivated my tempus warp, snapping his hand back as he touched it. It was glowing brightly, and there was a distinct heat haze above it.

He searched me out and nodded from across the courtyard; the next step was up to me. Or rather, to Regis.

Okay, it's time, I thought to him in his little glass jar as I started toward the tempus warp. *Be quick. We can't be sure how fast they'll respond.*

The tiny horned ball of light drifted out of the glass jar and then solidified into the form of a shadow wolf. Regis shook his mane, making it flare with violet light, and the nearest Alacryans yelped and stumbled away from him, pushing into the people behind them and creating a sort of miniature stampede.

The effect on the artifacts projecting the disruption field was immediate.

The aether, without Regis's intent keeping it flowing, simply ceased doing so. It began to leak from the wiring and the crystals, and without enough aether the field began to flicker in and out.

Regis hurried across the courtyard. A couple of Alacryans must have had second thoughts, because they broke from the ranks of their peers and ran after him.

Wordlessly, Cylrit ushered them through the portal.

"Go," I said, to Cylrit as well as Chul and Sylvie. "I'm right behind you."

Once they were gone, I picked up the tempus warp and held it under one arm. The disruption field failed, and people rushed to the bank of exit portals as Alacryan soldiers began pouring from the entrance portals; Dragoth must have been ready and waiting.

Shouting rose up from both sides. A woman threw herself at one of the soldiers, grasping at the front of his battle robes as she begged for his help. The butt of his spear came up and cracked her across the ribs. The shouting intensified as the remaining highbloods demanded order and attempted to take control of the situation, while those with lower blood status fought to get out the exit portals and the soldiers struggled to parse the situation. A

few noticed me standing in front of the fading tempus warp portal, but they had their hands full with the crowd.

Then Dragoth himself appeared, his bulk and bullish horns making him look like a giant against the swarm of Alacryans. His eyes found mine immediately, and he took a few aggressive steps forward, then drew up short. Even from across the zone, I could sense his fear.

Good, I thought, hoping that fear was enough to ensure these people would be okay.

Feeling the portal breaking up now that its connection with the tempus warp had been severed, I stepped backward through it.

Everything changed. The transition was smooth, not instant, but very nearly seamless. The false light of the blue Relictombs sky was replaced with true sunlight. Instead of the stifling atmosphere of the courtyard, I drew in a lungful of fresh air, and a cool breeze kissed my skin.

Turning, I tried to get my bearings. We had appeared in the broad grassy patch of land between the Beast Glades and one of the Alacryan settlements on the outskirts of the Elenoir Wastes. I searched the hundreds of milling people for my sister, Caera, or Seris, but didn't immediately see any of them.

Standing right beside me, though, were Chul and Sylvie.

I met my bond's eye. "Have you seen El—"

Sylvie's face was pale, sweat shining on her forehead. Her eyes were glazed over, staring sightlessly into the void.

Frowning, I reached for her, taking hold of her arm as my mind probed hers.

The strength left me and I felt my legs give out. I didn't even have time to wonder what had happened before my mind was being pulled away from my body, drawn along in the wake of whatever thought had stricken Sylvie.

Light and color flashed past on all sides, indistinct images appearing and vanishing again too quickly to make sense of. Although I couldn't see her, I could feel Sylvie just ahead of me. The world had melted away, and we

were alone, just the two of us, speeding like an arrow through this tunnel of lights.

I tried to speak, but I had no voice. I tried to connect with her mind but couldn't reach her.

What's happening? I wanted to shout. *Where are we going?*

As soon as I asked the question, I knew. We sped into a pool of roiling color, skating along a thin stream of silver light and into a blur of color and motion.

The world coalesced back into a recognizable form around us.

I reeled, taking a moment to get my bearings, but the scene was familiar.

A conference room. The one where I had last seen and spoken with the Glayders. But it looked quite different now.

The long table had been removed to make room for an opulent throne, on which sat a dragon in the form of a man with long silver hair and deep plum-colored eyes. I didn't recognize this dragon, but the name Charon came to me from a distant memory: the leader of Kezess's forces in Dicathen.

Two other dragons, both also in a humanoid form, flanked Charon, who was gazing down at a dozen humans, all of whom sat on their knees on the ground like children. Kathyln and Curtis were there as well, and many of their advisors. Words were being exchanged, but the vision sounded as if it were under water and a very long way away, so I couldn't make out anything.

Suddenly something shifted, like a dark cloud had floated over the scene. Five figures melted out of the shadows, blades and spells in their hands. There was no conversation, no hesitation. Even as they set on Charon, five more appeared around the two dragon guards, cutting them off.

The vision blurred, wobbling dangerously, the details difficult to follow.

When it steadied, the back wall of the chamber had been destroyed. Two Wraiths lay dead, as did a dragon, and the cacophonous rumble of battle

bubbled out of the dust and rubble that blocked my view beyond the room.

Charon himself was still surrounded by the other five Wraiths, who were working together in a fluid symphony of violence. Charon raged in near-silence, and his body swelled into the form of a horrible, war-scarred silver dragon, his massive claws and tail stamping and crushing.

I could do nothing as I watched Kathyln vanish beneath a clawed limb. Beside her, Curtis was hurled aside. Golden light suffused his body, but it twinkled and faded when a black blade passed effortlessly through him, blood spraying from a bisecting cut severing him hip to shoulder.

Horrified, I watched, frozen outside of space and time, unsure what I was seeing or how I was seeing it, unable to react, no body or magic of my own.

Charon's transformation had toppled the ceiling, burying most of the humans beneath a mountain of rubble. Disregarding any potential survivors, the dragon leapt up, desperately ripping his way free of the palace and taking to the air. Wheeling, he breathed death back down on everyone below, killing more Dicathians than the Wraiths had in his attempt to defend his own life.

The scene shattered like a painted vase, the pieces spiraling off in every direction before melting away in the tunnel of color and light once again.

My eyes snapped open, and I stared up into the face of Chul, who was leaning over me with a concerned expression. Regis was beside him, and Ellie beside Regis.

Movement under my hand made me look to my right. I was lying on the ground, Sylvie next to me, my hand still clasped around her arm.

"Arthur!" Ellie gasped, falling to her knees and leaning into me to wrap her arms around my neck. "Are you okay? What happened?"

Through her hair, I was still watching Sylvie, who slowly turned to meet my eye.

A vision? I asked, my thoughts sluggish.

Her eyes fluttered shut. *'Of…the future,'* she sent back ominously.

20

RIPPLE IN TIMELINE

ROLLING ONTO MY SIDE, I pushed myself up gingerly, and the small crowd moved back to give me space. As I held out my hand to Sylvie to help her up after me, a bolt of pain through my skull made me stumble, and an arm wrapped around me.

I looked down as Ellie leaned into me, trying to support some of my weight.

Sylvie seemed less affected by the vision and had no problem rising. She looked me over nervously. “I’m sorry, Arthur, I couldn’t hold it back from your mind.”

“Hold what back?” Ellie asked. “What happened?”

I blinked and shook my head, making an effort to dislodge the last of the aching cobwebs the vision had left in my head. “Nothing. Not here. We—” I cut myself off, acknowledging the crowd that had gathered and not wanting to say anything that would become a problem later.

Seris’s approaching aura was enough to pull most of the attention away from me. Her dark eyes met mine, and she seemed to read the situation in an instant. “There is much to do. Allow our companions a moment to catch their breaths. Remember, Lance Arthur Leywin has faced the Legacy herself on our behalf, and mind that you don’t inadvertently start unhelpful rumors, yes?”

The people who had been near enough to see my episode—which, unfortunately, was a lot—shrank back at Seris's thinly veiled ire.

A cascade of flame-red hair was the first I saw of Lyra Dreide as she hurried through the crowd. "Go on, then, all of you. There is much work to be done, and no room for idle hands!"

The Alacryans broke up and began milling away, although there was no shortage of backward glances.

"What's going on?" Lyra asked, leaning in toward Seris, who was watching me from the corner of her eye, her lips pressed tight with obvious worry.

"Let's have this conversation somewhere more private," Seris said, her words quiet but firm.

I nodded my agreement, and Lyra led our group to a nearby empty building that turned out to be little more than a single open room with several roughly made wooden chairs filling the space. No one sat as we all shuffled in. Every pair of eyes turned to me, including, I noticed, Highlords Frost and Denoir, who must have been speaking with either Seris or Lyra before my collapse.

Doing my best to keep the agitation from my inflection, I said, "My companions and I need to leave. Immediately."

"Just like that? You're not even going to tell me what happened, Arthur? This show of weakness could not have come at a worse time," Seris replied. Her gaze turned away, focusing into the middle distance, and when she spoke again, it was to herself. "But seeking acceptance from the dragons is essential. If we tell the people that you have gone to ensure the peace, then most will accept it without question…"

Her attention jumped back to me. "Still, as your partner in this venture I would like to know the truth of what has happened."

I thought back to the vision I'd shared with Sylvie.

A Wraith attack on Kezess's general, resulting in the deaths of the Glayders and who knows how many other important public figures in Etistin…

My concerns were many, but primary among them now was to verify that it really hadn't happened yet. If it hadn't, I could figure out how to prevent it. But sharing the information could be dangerous. If Elder Rinia had taught me anything, it was that attempting to change the future was exceedingly risky. I had to proceed with utmost caution.

Additionally, I wasn't sure who, if anyone, should know that Sylvie was having visions of the future. I didn't know if I could trust even Seris with that detail.

"I can't explain now," I said. "Not until I have a clearer idea of it myself."

There was a pause as our eyes remained locked.

"Never mind then, I can see that you're set on this." She broke eye contact with a humorless laugh. "Vritra's horns, but life was easier when I was surrounded by people who jumped to do whatever I said…"

I gave her a wry smile. "You're working very hard to deprive yourself of such a life."

Shaking her head, she waved me away as if I were a particularly irritating fly. "Go on, do what you must. I'd have liked to offer you more preparation for your conversation with the dragons regarding our defection, but I suppose I trust you to handle it on your own. All I will ask is that you take one of mine with you. As my eyes, ears, and voice, as it were."

"No," I said, quicker and more forcefully than I'd intended. "I…don't think that's a good idea."

Seris's look hardened, what little good humor she'd maintained slipping away. "No? Arthur, this partnership works in both directions. You have asked for me not to question your reason for leaving at this critical moment and without prior discussion. I am requesting that you make this concession in return."

I ran my tongue along the inside of my teeth as I considered. Being in between dragons and Wraiths was no place for an Alacryan deserter, but it would tear open a rift between Seris and me if I forced the issue. "I concede the point, then," I said after a long pause.

Highlord Frost stepped forward, giving the two of us a small bow. “Lady Seris, I’d like to offer my granddaughter, Enola, for this task. She is highly capable, and familiar with Regent Arthur from their time at the academy.”

“Thank you, Uriel, but I want someone slightly more seasoned for this task.”

She nodded to him in appreciation, and he bit back anything else he wanted to say, retreating to his previous spot against the wall.

She continued, her words directed toward Corbett. “Caera would be a stronger candidate for the role I have in mind, not least of all because she has already worked alongside Arthur at length and has direct experience with the dragons. I trust her in this and am certain she will be willing. Can you fetch her?”

I kept my thoughts to myself, not wanting to prolong this any further now that I’d already given in to Seris’s demand.

While we waited for Corbett to return, Seris spent a few minutes providing me with the basis of her plans in the Elenoir Wastes so that I might pass them along to the dragons if I thought necessary. When Caera arrived, I bade Seris farewell and led my companions out of the village and into the Beast Glades.

“There is a town near the western edge of the Beast Glades, not too far to the south. It’s the closest teleportation gate that will get us to Etistin,” I explained as we marched.

“Don’t think that I’m unhappy to be coming along,” Caera said, glancing around furtively as we moved into the dense treeline, “but what exactly are we rushing off in such a hurry for?”

Hopping over a downed tree, I turned and gave Ellie my hand to help her over, then Caera behind her. As I took Caera’s hand, I said, “I’ve discovered some…evidence…that leads me to believe Wraiths will be attacking Etistin in the near future.”

Chul slammed a bricklike fist into his open palm, heat rising from his shoulders in visible waves of orange light. “A chance for vengeance.”

“Wraiths…” Caera said breathily, her brows knitting into a frown. “But how could you know? Have a djinn relic in your pocket that shows you the future?” She attempted a playful smile, but it came across as pained.

“No. I…can’t explain yet. I’m sorry. Perhaps when we reach Etistin and have had time to scope out the situation there,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

Ellie had gone pale as I spoke, and I was certain she was remembering the aftermath of my last fight against Agrona’s secret asura-killers.

‘So are we just going to, like, not talk about the whole visions of the future thing then?’ Regis asked as he loped along at my side. *‘Sylvie is amassing quite the collection of mysterious subplots, isn’t she?’*

She needs time to probe her own understanding and insight of this vision, I thought back. *Until we have a better idea of why and what happened, no one else should know.* Out loud, I said, “Here is good enough,” coming to a stop in a small clearing and looking at my bond.

Sylvie, whose mind was a muddle of surging and conflicting thoughts and ideas, forced herself to focus. The transformation was nearly instant as she grew into the form of a black-scaled dragon.

Caera gasped, her mouth moving silently as she stared up in awe.

“It’s not *that* impressive. Wings are overrated, anyway,” Regis said as he stepped into me and drifted to my core. I hopped up on Sylvie’s back at the base of her neck, and Chul helped Caera and Ellie mount between Sylvie’s wings.

Caera tentatively reached out and brushed her fingers along the back of one wing, a shiver running through her.

From the ground, Boo growled low in his throat, his small eyes peering up at Ellie questioningly.

I pressed my hand reassuringly against Sylvie’s long neck as she stared down at Boo with one huge eye like a pool of liquid gold. “It won’t be too much?” I asked.

“Just as long as I don’t have to carry Chul, too, I’ll be fine,” she said, her voice rich and rumbling in her draconic form.

Chul flew into the air and waited. Sylvie grabbed Boo in her large front claws, gathered herself, and sprang up, her wings beating at the air with graceful ease. Chul moved into position beside her, and we took off to the southwest. We stayed just above the treetops, not worrying about an attack from any mana beasts; the combined auras of Sylvie, Chul, and myself would keep all but the most powerful and aggressive mana beasts from attacking, and we were a long way from the depths of the Beast Glades where such creatures dwelled.

On dragonback, the journey only took us a couple of hours, saving days of slogging through the dense forest below. Sylvie transformed back well outside of town, and we completed the journey on foot. We had no need of the Adventurers Guild or any vendors, and so we didn’t stop anywhere in town but instead went straight to the teleportation gate.

Before approaching the gate attendant, who would program the gate to Etistin for us, I stopped my companions and looked at them all seriously. I had been mulling over how to proceed for the entire journey and had made a few decisions that I knew not everyone would approve of.

“Ellie, you’re not coming to Etistin with us,” I said, ripping the bandage off what I knew was going to be a difficult conversation.

“I understand,” she said, catching me off guard. She smiled at my surprise. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. If you’re right, I know I can’t be in Etistin with you. But I will get stronger. I want to make a difference in”—she gesticulated randomly with her hand—“all this, in the best way that I can. If that means staying out of the way and being safe for a bit, then that’s what I’ll do.”

She reached out her fist, and I bumped my own against it with a grateful smile.

Regis, who had resumed walking with us in his physical form, reached up and placed a huge paw on our hands, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. Ellie laughed, and I rolled my eyes.

“What, isn’t this a team huddle?” he joked.

Chul, who had watched our exchange with a deepening look of concern, huffed. “Sister Eleanor cannot be sent off on her own.” He ground his teeth, clearly considering his next words carefully. “Though I wish to test myself against these Wraiths, I also hope to do my duty to you, Arthur, and make a difference,” he said, his tone conveying a not-quite-entirely suppressed somberness. “If you wish it, I will escort her back to the dwarfhome, Vildorial, and watch over her in your absence.”

I let out a sigh of relief, grateful that Chul had offered before I had to ask. With no long-distance teleportation gates remaining in Vildorial, the safest way for Ellie to return would be to fly. “Thank you, Chul. I understand why you left the Hearth, and what this means to you. My hope is that there is no battle in Etistin, and that you don’t miss out on any of the fun.”

He grunted and gave me a serious nod. “Yes, but if you do meet a Wraith, give them a thorough butt-kicking for me.”

“Besides, Bairon and Mica will be in Vildorial. Maybe even Lance Varay! They’re really awesome to train with,” my sister said brightly, her own fear and frustration barely evident. Boo rumbled, and Ellie grinned. “Boo says he’d be happy to bat you around a bit, too, if you need it.”

Chuckling, I turned to Sylvie, Regis, and Caera. “Let’s go then.”

The mage quickly calibrated the portal and ushered us through. The last thing I saw as I glanced over my shoulder was Ellie, flanked by Chul and Boo. She waved. I lifted my hand and was whisked away.

It had been a long time since I’d traveled by the ancient mages’ portals in Dicathen. I’d gotten used to the Alacryan’s tempus warp technology, which made teleportation much faster and smoother. The portals of Dicathen—relics left behind after the djinn genocide—dragged the user across space, which distorted as it sped by, and had been known to make people ill the first time they used it.

I realized halfway there that I should have warned Caera.

As we appeared one by one in front of the receiving portal, Caera bent over and clutched her stomach, trying not to be sick. A soldier, who had likely

seen this happen more than once, hopped back, his mouth snapping shut as he cut off whatever memorized message of welcome he'd been about to deliver.

Caera took several deep breaths and held up her hand as if to ward off her nausea. "I'm fine," she said hoarsely. "But…what in the Vritra's name was *that?*" Finally, she stood and glared at me. "Absolutely barbaric."

The moment of amusement I felt melted away as I remembered why we were there, which coincided with the soldier snapping to attention as he realized who I was.

"Regent Leywin!" He stepped around Caera and reached for my hand with both of his. "It's great to meet you, really, a true honor. You saved my father at the battle of Slore, sir, and I've always hoped for the chance to thank you in person."

"I should be the one to thank your father for his service," I said with a practiced smile, allowing him to shake my hand.

Suddenly remembering himself, the guard snapped back into a more professional stance. "Sorry, Regent. I got a little excited. I'm sure you're here to see Guardian Charon."

Looking at another guard, who was poking his head in through the door of the small building that housed the portal, he started to give an order, but I interjected. "Actually, I need my arrival to stay quiet."

The guard hesitated, glancing from me to the palace in the distance, visible through one of the narrow windows.

"I understand you have your orders," I continued, trying to sound both confident and consoling. "I don't want to insult Charon by not going to see him right away, but lives are at stake. I really need you to just pretend like I never stepped out of this portal."

The guard hesitated as he inspected my companions, frowning at Sylvie's and Caera's horns. "But the Glayders were very insistent…" Trailing off, he shook his head and snapped into a salute. "You have my word, Regent."

Returning the gesture, I marched quickly from the portal chamber and out into the courtyard beyond. Two more guards stood outside, including the one who had peeked his head in the door. I gave them a nonchalant salute and led my companions out of sight, taking shelter in a narrow alley between two tall townhomes.

“Well, that’s one question answered,” I said.

“Etistin hasn’t already been attacked,” Caera filled in. “But the Wraiths may still be here already. From what Seris was able to tell me, they’ll be adept at hiding their mana signatures and arranging the battlefield to suit them.”

A figure crossed in front of the alley where we were huddled, but it was only an older gentleman out for a walk with his mana beast, a creature like a feathered lizard that skittered ahead of him on a leather leash.

Addressing Sylvie and Caera, I said, “I want you to go to the palace. Find Kathyln and explain what we’ve seen. Question her about the dragons. Whatever you do, though, don’t let her bring you to Charon.” My gaze turned up to Caera’s horns. “Or let them arrest you.”

She crossed her arms and gave me a severe look. “That wasn’t my fault.”

Extending my senses outward, I felt for potent mana signatures in and around the city. The pressure exuded by the dragons was evident even from where we stood, but I felt no other presence strong enough to be an asura or Wraith.

I probed the dragons’ signatures and felt a hint of familiarity.

“Windsom is here as well,” I confirmed. “Neither can know you’re in the city until we’re ready to deal with them, Sylv. They might try to haul you away, back to your grandfather.”

“What will you be doing?” Caera asked, her eyes jumping to the blurred figure of a small child as they dashed past the alley mouth.

“Regis and I will search the city for any sign of the Wraiths.”

Sylvie took my hand and squeezed it gently before letting it go. “Reach out to me if you get into trouble. Yes, I know you’ve faced Wraiths before, but

don’t get complacent.”

“Be careful in the palace,” I said in answer. “It’s certain to be a political quagmire.”

Caera and Sylvie made their way out of the alley, heading across the city toward the palace. I leapt to the townhouse roof and activated Realmheart, Regis once again sheltering inside my core. I watched them forge their way into Etistin’s city streets until they’d disappeared from view, then I turned my focus to the task at hand.

Atmospheric mana shone everywhere, with the specific elements closely aligned to where the mana lingered, such as earth-attribute mana clinging to the ground and stone walls, while air-attribute mana whirled and danced along on the wind. These mana particles were nearly always in motion, being drawn toward a meditating mage or pushed away from the source of some spell, or just winding their way through the world in accordance with the inborn mechanical properties of the mana itself.

The aether in the atmosphere was much less dense. Only a thin curtain of purple particles could be seen filling in the spaces between mana particles.

It was exactly the interplay between those two forces that I was concerned with.

The Wraiths couldn’t influence aether, and so they couldn’t manipulate it to help mask their presence. I couldn’t be sure just how effectively they could do so with mana, and so I couldn’t rely on Realmheart alone in my search. Although the godrune let me see even the clustered mana of an invisible or illusioned mage, I theorized that a magic user with suitably refined control over mana could smooth away even that to make themselves truly undetectable, especially if they also balanced the input and output of their mana with a technique similar to mana rotation.

Missing my ability to fly more than I had in quite a long time, I leapt from one roof to the next, needing to stay as high as I could for maximum visibility. The interplay between aether and mana was very subtle and easily missed.

And we have a whole city to search, I thought, my mood sour. Still, a proactive approach seemed better than waiting at the palace for something to happen.

With aether enhancing my senses and Realmheart granting me vision of mana particles, I proceeded to navigate from one neighborhood to the next, searching for any condensed mana without an obvious source, a hint of suppressed mana signature, or changes in the atmospheric aether than might indicate a powerful source of condensed but hidden mana.

Meanwhile, Sylvie and Caera reached the palace but were still waiting for an audience with Kathyln.

As I searched, I tried to remember what the city had looked like before the war, but I couldn't. The tall walls cutting the city off from the slope down to the bay hadn't been there, I knew, and the city's separate districts had been reshaped and walled off from each other, with some entire neighborhoods vanishing altogether. Etistin still carried a militaristic air, a city fashioned into a fortified hub of countrywide politics, but the people seemed to move about as if they didn't notice.

A thought struck me. *Keep a lookout for areas where people are behaving strangely,* I sent to Regis, who acted like a second set of eyes. *Areas people are avoiding without seeming to realize it. Places that accrue dark glances, where passersby speed up to get past quickly.*

'Yeah, no problem,' he replied, his tone oozing sarcasm. *'It's not like we're searching for a needle in a haystack or anything. An invisible needle poised to kill everyone.'*

As I resumed my search, I jumped down into the street, swiping a faded turquoise cloak off a clothesline and dropping a coin in the pocket of a pair of trousers. The hood was deep, falling down to obscure my wheat-blond hair and golden eyes.

It also covered the glow of my godrunes as I activated God Step alongside Realmheart.

Slipping into the streams of traffic, I opened myself to my senses, experiencing the sights and sounds, but also the sixth sense that was the tug

of the mana, which in turn was overlaid with the sight and song of the aetheric pathways connecting every point to every other point around me.

I followed the current of the city, moving with the natural ebb and flow of its people. It was there, I was certain, at the confluence of mana, aether, and human sensitivity, that I would find my prey.

The passage of time became a meaningless blur, keeping track of it a sense that I lost as I focused entirely on the others. The movement of my feet was automatic, the subtle turning of my head to listen to a child's whimper or watch a woman hurry past a darkened doorway done without conscious effort.

'There,' Regis thought, honing in on a distant patch of city wall sometime later.

Following the course of his mind, I watched as a pair of guards froze, glancing at each other. Aether rushed into my eyes, enhancing my vision so I could focus on the distant point. The guards were pale, sweating, the question in their eyes obvious: why am I suddenly afraid? As one, they turned and began marching back along their patrol route, but too quickly to be natural.

I moved into the shadows of a building; the sun was setting, I realized, and the shadows were deep. With my hood drawn low and my back hunched, I shuffled toward the wall, suppressing my sight and hearing to instead focus on the mana and aether.

There it was, what I'd been looking for: a subtle distortion in the aetheric pathways, a twitch in the atmospheric mana.

Then it was gone.

Frowning, I expanded my senses again, searching for the same phenomenon nearby. When I couldn't feel it, I risked jumping up to the top of the wall, where I immediately crouched behind the low stone edge and searched with my eyes as well.

My sharp-eyed companion again spotted it first. *'The marketplace.'*

Peering down over the townhouse roofs, I scanned the small market square tucked up against the foot of the district wall. Beneath that wall, the shadows grew deeper, and—there!

No strong source of mana emanated from the marketplace, and the only mana signatures were a handful of wandering mages, none of whom were higher than orange core. But in the heart of those shadows, the atmospheric mana distorted ever so slightly, so subtle I might have missed it if not for the faintest distortion of the aetheric pathways that suggested a powerful source of mana was pressing against the aether around it.

Everyone who approached the shadows turned away, wrapping their arms around themselves or shivering as if they'd had a sudden chill before hurrying to a different part of the marketplace.

I started moving in that direction, keeping my eye on that one spot.

The distortion dissolved, mana and aether relaxing as they eased back into their normal configuration.

But it didn't take me long to find the distortion again, now on the other side of the wall within the shadows of a tower.

'It's heading out of the city,' Regis pointed out.

It knows we've seen it.

Casting off the cloak, I pressed Regis, and he manifested from my long shadow, his paws on the wall's edge. The aetheric pathways opened before me, and I appeared in the tower's shadow, violet lightning bolts running up my arms and down my legs.

I felt the pressure exuded by the invisible figure for half a second, then it vanished.

'On top of the city's outer wall!' Regis said, guiding me excitedly as he rushed along the wall to have a better view.

Feeling the paths, I God Stepped again, this time into the shadow of a guard post that topped the tall outer wall on the south edge of the city.

'Already gone,' Regis huffed. *'Over the wall somewhere.'*

I had to search this time, but I was starting to see the pattern.

South of the wall, many low buildings had been erected to replace those demolished before and during the war. I searched their shadows and found the disturbance just as it vanished again, reappearing behind a building a few hundred feet farther away.

The aetheric pathways took me there, and again I appeared just as the distortion vanished.

Distantly, through his senses, I felt Regis leap off the high wall and hit the ground running behind me.

I found and God Stepped after the distortion again, but I had to look for my prey, whereas it just had to keep running, and again it kept just ahead of me.

After a few more rapid shifts, though, we reached the end of the slums built outside of the city walls. What few trees had grown on these stony steppes approaching the bay had been cut down during the war, providing a clear view for over a mile, and with the only shadows provided by wild shrubs, low bushes, or young, straggly trees.

But the sun was nearly down now, and those shadows were growing longer by the moment.

The disturbance appeared in the shadows of a large rock, suddenly veering eastward. I scanned the area beyond the rock, where a row of wild berry bushes provided the only shadow of substance.

Charting the path through the aether, I God Stepped first to the rock, then to the bushes, not waiting in between.

I would have grinned as the disturbance swelled right beside me, like claws through the shadows, except there was no time.

A dark shard of black ice stabbed out of the air, aimed at my throat. I parried, but when I reached for the hidden arm holding the blade, I grabbed nothing but air. Another blade thrust from the side, aimed at my hip, then another in front of me, driving up under my ribs toward my heart.

I blocked both strikes, imbuing the third impact with an aetheric blast that incinerated the bushes. Moving in the wake of the blast, an aether blade appeared in my fist, sweeping into the center mass of the disruption in a blur as aether exploded through my arm in precise sequence.

I felt the blade meet resistance as it found my target’s flesh and bone.

The shadows fell away like a cloak being pulled from my target's shoulders as they rolled across the ground and back to their feet. One arm had been completely severed, the bloody appendage lying on the ground between us. The thin, pale man pressed his remaining hand against the gushing stump, glaring at me with bright red eyes through the bangs of his dark, unruly hair. “The ascender…” he said, his voice oozing out of him and staining my eardrums.

“Where are the rest of you?” I demanded, keeping some distance between us but ready to counter if he so much as twitched.

He shook his head, but no emotions crossed his face beyond a twinge of registered pain. “No warning, last time. The High Sovereign didn’t tell them what you are. A toe-to-toe fight, a real one. A rare treat for them, even though they died. Won’t happen again, ascender. But not here for you. Knives in the dark, but not for you.”

“You’re standing on the wrong continent,” I said, shifting my weight forward slightly. “Which means that even if you’re not here for me, I *am* here for you. Now where are the others? I know you’re not here alone.”

Regis approached from behind, circling around to pen the Wraith in from the other side.

The pale man shook his head again and, strangely, seemed to relax. “Already too late. Can’t run, can’t talk, can’t win.”

I cocked my head slightly. “I’m not running, but I promise you, I can win. I *am* about done talking, though. If you can’t—”

“Not you, ascender. He is watching.” He pointed to his red eye. “My eye to his. He knows. So it is already too late.”

“He? You mean Agrona? He’s—” I took an involuntary step back as mana swelled within and around the Wraith.

He let out a choked gasp and fell to one knee, then looked up at me with a wide grin on his face, dark blood trickling from the corners.

Regis, back!

I slipped into God Step even as the mana erupted.

From several hundred feet away, with aetheric electricity still cascading down my limbs, I watched as a nova of black mana and blood iron spikes burst from the Wraith’s flesh, spraying outward in a deadly dome that ripped the ground apart for a hundred feet in every direction. A rain of black metal spikes continued to fall for many long seconds after the explosion.

I was still staring at the field of spikes as Regis came padding up beside me. “These Alacryans and their blood curses.” When I didn’t reply, he added, “Think that’s it? Attack deflected?”

“No,” I said, knowing the truth.

We hadn’t stopped the attack. We had simply changed events to a future that we now didn’t know.

21

A SILENT AND UNMOVING CONFLICT

KATHYLN GLAYDER

I hurried down the long, strangely empty halls of Etistin Palace toward the East Wing, where two very unusual guests were waiting for me.

My pulse was beating quickly in my throat, driven by my own inexplicable nervousness.

Calm yourself, Kathyln, I thought, my mental voice sounding all too much like my deceased mother. But everything had moved so quickly after the appearance of the dragons, with Curtis and me being swept along in a tide we could not control or fight, and I had just begun settling my head around this new normal. It was only natural that such visitors, who asked for me and me alone, would make me nervous given the political context.

The clipped rapping of my feet on the marble floor resounded off the walls and came back to me as a subtle echo, like someone was walking just behind me. Normally such sounds wouldn't be noticeable in the palace; the dull but constant drone of conversation, or competing footsteps, or the ring of training blades from the courtyard, would swallow it up.

But few could stand staying in the palace now, so near the dragons' heavy auras—the King's Force, as they called it.

I passed by a guard, whose arrow-straight posture straightened even further at the sight of me. He did not meet my eye, but I felt his gaze burning into my back once I'd passed. Could he sense my anxiety, read me like an open book? I listened for the telltale armored steps of the man retreating down the hall to report my strange behavior to Guardian Charon.

I'm being foolish, I acknowledged. *Do not succumb to your overactive mind*. Again, the thought in my mother's voice…

As I approached the sitting chamber where my guests had been placed to await my arrival, I straightened my dress and fixed a welcoming smile on my face, feeling it tremble only slightly.

They were both already standing as I entered, their eyes on the door.

Such inhuman eyes they had, one pair the liquid gold of the sun's reflection on water, the other like two shining rubies.

"Lady Sylvie," I said, acknowledging her with a sharp but shallow bow, not exactly sure how she ranked in the currently complicated politics of Epheotus and Dicathen.

She returned the bow, much deeper, a respectful but also carefree gesture that made me regret my own calculated greeting. Her pale hair tumbled over her face, bright against the dark horns curving out from the sides of her head. When she straightened, smiling, I was struck by her height and the sharpness of her features.

I shouldn't have been. It was only natural that she would age and grow. But the last time I'd seen her—sometime during the war; I wasn't even quite sure exactly how long it had been—she had presented herself physically as a child when in her humanoid form. Now, she was a young woman, and yet the confidence and maturity that radiated from her like an aura made her seem much older.

She stepped quickly forward, and her black dress swished and caught the light, its thousands of tiny black scales glittering.

I tensed as she wrapped me in a brief hug.

She didn’t seem to notice as she released me, still beaming brightly. “Lady Kathyln. It is good to see you again. Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice. I have no doubt you are very busy, and I understand the nature of our arrival is somewhat…unusual.”

As she said “our,” I turned to her companion with the red eyes.

Blue hair fell down the full-figured woman’s shoulders, simultaneously dark next to the black horns wrapping around her head like a crown and bright as it framed those ruby eyes. She was Alacryan, one of the beings they called Vritra-blooded. She was suppressing her mana, preventing me from properly gauging her core level, although that alone told me something: she was stronger than me.

The woman copied Lady Sylvie’s bow, although she did not break eye contact, giving the motion an almost aggressive air. “Lady Kathyln Glayder. My name is Caera of Highblood Denoir. As Sylvie said, thank you for meeting us.”

I gestured to a stiff couch across from a high-backed chair, taking the chair for myself. My fingers automatically went to the carefully carved grooves in the arm’s woodwork, tracing the lines as I considered the two women. “Lady Sylvie, I find it somewhat disconcerting that you’ve asked for me in some secrecy when there are members of your own race present in this very palace. Why not seek the counsel of your own kind? Furthermore, why keep your presence a secret?”

Sylvie sat very properly, her gaze unwavering. It was easy to see her as some divine princess from the far-off land of dragons. It was a bit more difficult to keep in mind my own purpose and the guidance and direction I had received from Guardian Charon and Windsom about how Arthur and his companions were to be treated in the event they returned to Etistin.

Meeting with them in secret behind Guardian Charon’s back was certainly not a part of said guidance.

“Arthur has sent me to inform you of a potential attack on the palace,” she said, managing to be both confident and consoling. “An attack targeting the dragons that would nonetheless put you and your brother in extreme danger.”

I felt my lips' desire to frown, but I held them firm, keeping every muscle in my face in its natural place, just as my mother had taught me from a very young age. "I hope you have more to say than that. An attack on the dragons…who would dare such a thing? The fact that you're here offering a warning makes it clear you find the threat to be sincere, but I can't imagine who, short of the opposing asuras, would be a relevant danger."

Sylvie seemed to consider something for a moment, then words began to flow out of her as she wove a story of visions and powerful, asura-killing assassins, dead dragons, and even my own demise. I was surprisingly unmoved as she explained this part, although her mention of my brother's brutal murder raised goosebumps all over my skin.

I maintained my posture and expression throughout, but on the inside, I was a roiling sea of uncertainty. I was aware of Arthur's fight against these "Wraiths" in Vildorial, as were Windsom and Guardian Charon, but it was the dragons' opinion that Agrona's soldiers did not pose them, or us, any threat. The war was over, and the dragons were protecting Dicathen.

It was perhaps not fair to Lady Sylvie, but I was also skeptical of any such visions that claimed to see future events. My parents, as the king and queen of Sapin, had been surrounded by soothsayers and seers attempting to peddle prophecies at every juncture. Except for Elder Rinia, I had never met anyone claiming to be an oracle who could tell so much as the next day's weather.

The Alacryan woman, Caera, listened just as raptly as I, clearly not having known the full story until that moment. Another point of strangeness working against them.

When she finished, Lady Sylvie was silent as she waited for my response, giving me time to properly formulate it.

"Forgive me. That is a lot to take in," I said, searching her golden eyes for any sign of deceit but finding none. I imagined Arthur stalking a faceless creature of shadow through the streets of Etistin at that very moment, and a shiver ran through me. "I admit, hearing your tale has only made me more confused. If the goal is to prevent this attack on Guardian Charon, why not speak to him directly?"

I thought through the question even as I was asking it and came to the answer on my own. “You do not want the other dragons to know you are here until Arthur is with you. And Arthur does not want to go to Charon without some proof of the Wraiths’ presence.” I felt the smallest frown purse my lips and smoothed it away. “Are such gifts of foresight common among your kind, Lady Sylvie?”

Her head cocked slightly to the side as she considered me. “No. Arthur has always trusted you, Kathyln, and so I chose to as well. I hope I made the correct decision.”

Coming from anyone else, the barbed words would have drawn my ire, but from this golden-eyed dragon, all I could think was that I also hoped that she was right to tell me the truth.

“There is a general council meeting tomorrow,” I said after a long pause. “What you describe, it sounds like what we—”

Mana erupted in the distance, and I forgot what I was saying, instead staring at the wall in the direction of the source.

“A decay-type mana art,” Caera said, frowning. “That was *a lot* of mana.”

I stood suddenly, smoothing out my dress. “Stay here. No one will bother you. But the dragons will have sensed that as well—hells, the entire city will have. I need to make sure there isn’t a panic.”

Before either of the women could speak, I turned on my heel and marched out of the chamber. The guard from before had moved from his post and was standing in the middle of the hall, staring as if expecting an army of Alacryans to come pouring down it at any moment. He spun and snapped into a salute when he heard my approach.

I whisked past him and headed for the main palace entry. As expected, I found Curtis already there, standing in the outer courtyard and staring east. He glanced at me as I moved to stand at his side.

“Did you feel that?” he asked, frowning. Grawder, my brother’s world lion bond, gave a low growl, and Curtis patted his mane.

I didn’t answer, as Windsom entered the courtyard at that moment, every hair perfectly in place, his military-style uniform as crisp and well-kept as always. His ethereal, starry-night eyes stared upward, and I followed his gaze just as a transformed dragon appeared, its shadow sweeping over us and speeding toward the source of the explosion.

“I thought we agreed there would be no transformed dragons within the city proper,” I said halfheartedly, knowing my protest would fall on deaf ears.

At my side, Curtis shifted uncomfortably. The dragons made him inexplicably nervous, and he hated whenever I said or did anything he deemed “impertinent.”

We did not have to wait long for the dragon’s return.

The huge blue reptilian being landed right in the courtyard with us, the wind of its wings making me stumble. Grawder moved between us, shielding Curtis and me with his body.

And so I didn’t immediately see the passenger who rode on the dragon’s back, not until I lowered my arm and stepped around Grawder.

Arthur, his physical appearance so changed that it still caught me off guard to see him, slid down to the ground and started walking toward us, heedless of the deity at his back, as if he rode on a dragon all the time.

I startled, almost laughing to myself, although my long-practiced sense of decorum prevented this. *Of course, because he does ride on a dragon*.

“Call for Guardian Charon!” Edirith, the blue dragon, announced, his voice just as gargantuan as his draconic form. “I have brought the one called Arthur Leywin! Call for the Guardian!”

Windsom stepped forward and raised a hand, and Edirith stilled and went silent before resuming his humanoid form. Windsom smiled warmly at Arthur and opened his mouth to speak, but Arthur walked right past him, instead approaching Curtis and me. I traced his sharp features with my eyes, searching for the boy I’d known at Xyrus Academy or the young general he had become during the war, but just as the last time I’d seen him, this new Arthur presented so little of who he’d been before.

And yet he is perhaps even more handsome than before, if that's possible.

I cleared my throat, shaking off my distraction. "Arthur, it's a pleasure to see you."

"Kathyln." Unexpectedly, he reached out and pulled me into an embrace. A tingle ran along my skin as his lips moved so close to my ear that I could feel the whisper of his breath as he said, "The others?"

Understanding I returned his embrace as I would an old friend and nodded ever so slightly.

He let me go, and I straightened my dress again, carefully avoiding glancing in Windsom's direction as he instead held out a hand to my brother.

"Curtis," he said simply as they shook hands. "You're growing a beard. I'm not sure it's working for you."

Curtis let out the boyish laugh he was known all throughout Sapin for, but the joy of it didn't reach his eyes. He was guarded, wary, and Grawder picked up on the tension, lowering his head and shaking out his mane, his gleaming eyes locked on Arthur. Long gone were the days of camaraderie at Xyrus Academy between members of the Disciplinary Committee.

I hated that politics poisoned my thoughts even in that moment, just as I knew what my brother was thinking. And yet there was no escaping it. Our country—our entire continent—was too fragile not to consider every option as we attempted to rebuild.

"So, Arthur Leywin finally graces us with his presence," Windsom said, his hands clasped behind his back. "Hello, boy. Where is my lord's granddaughter? I hope you haven't lost her. Again."

Arthur and Windsom matched unfriendly looks, a contest I couldn't help but expect the asura to win. And yet, Arthur did not seem like a man studying a deity. No, he was not lesser in this contest of wills. There was something distinctly predatory in his eyes that made me instinctively take a step back.

“Sylvie is fine. Safe, which in this case means far away from you at the moment. I have news for whomever is in charge of the dragons,” Arthur said, his voice absent any obvious disrespect while still managing to sound directly combative. “Imagine my surprise to learn that wasn’t you, old friend.”

With each word the two exchanged, I grew more uncomfortable.

The dragons had spent months with us in Sapin helping to rebuild and keeping us safe from additional attacks from Alacrya. They were sometimes difficult to understand, and their dispositions were not like any humans, elves, or dwarves I had ever met, but that was to be expected. They weren’t like us, and it was improper to gauge them on our metrics.

And yet it had been Arthur who swept across the continent like a storm of fire to burn away the Alacryan occupation. Arthur, too, was responsible for the treaty with the lord of Epheotus, Kezess Indrath, which brought the dragons to our shores.

Seeing their conflict caused a raw, caustic ache in my stomach. Dicathen couldn’t afford these forces to be pitted against one another, although I thought I understood the reason for Arthur’s attitude, at least.

After all, the smoke still rose over much of Elenoir, where our old ally, General Aldir, turned the forests to ash.

I dreaded the thought of threading myself like a needle between these two titanic forces, but who else was there to do it? There was far too much at stake to let the antipathy between them derail the future of our entire continent.

Taking a step forward so the movement would draw their attention to me instead of each other, I gestured toward the palace entrance. “Windsom, Edirith, please attend me as I escort Arthur to Guardian Charon.” Keeping my tone as neutral as I was able, I continued. “Charon Indrath has been… keen to meet with you, Arthur. I’m certain he will be willing to hear you out.”

Arthur relaxed and fell in beside me, holding out his arm for me to take. Windsom turned on his heel and marched away without a second glance, his

hands clasped behind his back, while Curtis somewhat awkwardly marched on Arthur's other side. Edirith fell into step behind us, his agitated aura lashing us like a whip. My body was rigid with tension, each step like I was crossing broken glass, but I held it all in.

Somehow, despite his earlier intensity, Arthur seemed as relaxed and at ease as if we were out for an afternoon stroll in the palace gardens. *I'd much rather be walking through the gardens than—*

I clipped the improper thought off as soon as I recognized where it was going. I was the thread that would stitch the wound between Guardian Charon and Arthur, and I couldn't afford to start showing either favoritism. Thoughts eventually became action, even inadvertently.

When we arrived at the throne room, I was unsurprised to see the entire council had already been convened. Although it took us ages to discuss even the simplest issues, when the Guardian called on them, they practically teleported to his feet. I didn't hold this against them, however. The dragons' presence was overwhelming, and the Guardian himself doubly so. They simply played the game of politics as best they knew how.

Otto and Cousin Florian had their heads together, whispering animatedly. Lord Astor was lingering as close to Guardian Charon as he dared, and I saw Jackun Maxwell and Lady Lambert as well. The others of the council either spoke quietly among themselves or waited in tense silence.

Charon himself sat stiffly on the dais at the foot of the throne, where he always sat when events caused us to use this room. The dragon didn't need a throne to make him look regal or powerful.

A row of guards lined the walls to the left and right, at least four times the number we usually requested for such events. It was an impressive display, taking me back to my days as a child in these very halls, when it was my father sitting on that throne with my mother at his side.

I felt cold and distant as I thought of them. Knowing that particular emotion would be useful for what was coming, I held onto it tight.

Windsom came to a halt before we'd crossed a quarter of the throne room, forcing me to stop behind him. He opened his mouth to introduce us but

hesitated when the sharp sound of footfalls continued to resound through the cavernous chamber.

All eyes gravitated to Arthur as he left me behind, marched past Windsom as if the dragon were as unremarkable as sagebrush, and headed straight for the Guardian, his stride unbroken by nerves or the bitterness of self-doubt. I could only watch, spellbound, as Arthur crossed the throne room like a riverskin hunting in the bay.

Edirith hurried after him, his powerful hand closing on Arthur's shoulder. "None approach the Guardian without—"

Arthur turned, his golden eyes flashing like the edge of a blade.

The dragon faltered, and Arthur continued on, hardly breaking his stride.

The entire chamber remained frozen in rapt anticipation.

"Guardian Charon," Arthur said. He stopped walking as he spoke, standing just before the throne, and the sound of his voice was like the breaking of the spell, and the entire congregation seemed to take a breath all at once. "*Guardian*. I didn't think to ask Vajrakor whose idea that title was. But then, he and I didn't get along very well. I'm hoping this meeting will go better."

Charon stood, looming head and shoulders above Arthur from his place on the dais, but he did not linger there, choosing instead to step down and meet Arthur eye to eye.

Energy crackled like a physical force between them as they regarded each other. There was a silent and unmoving conflict between them, or rather the intent they both wielded like a weapon. In a way, they were a sort of mirror of each other.

Charon was the same height as Arthur and yet seemed to tower over everyone around him. His build wasn't powerful, matching Arthur's lean and graceful athleticism, but his raw strength was visible in his every movement. He shared Sylvie's light-colored hair, which I assumed was an Indrath trait—*does that have something to do with Arthur's transformation, I wonder?*—but his eyes were deep, dark pools of plum purple.

In their faces, though, the two were nothing alike. Although Arthur had returned aged, his face sharper and more mature than before the war, he still looked like a boy next to Charon, whose features were grizzled with the scars of a thousand battles, pock-marked with old burns, and hardened into unbending expectation.

It was a face that conjured both fear and respect with nothing more than a look.

What it did not do was smile often, and yet the Guardian's scarred cheek twitched, and the corner of his lips quirked up in amusement. "Yes, Vajrakor was quite thorough in his description of that meeting, as well as in his approximation of your abilities and temperament."

Windsom took this as some sort of cue and moved forward again, taking up his position to their left. The dragon guard flanked Charon. Wanting my physical position to remain neutral, I stood opposite the group from Windsom, my brother at my side.

"Welcome to Etistin, Arthur Leywin," Charon said, his deep voice a thunderous rumble. "It is good that we are finally meeting, even if the circumstances are less than ideal. The disturbance outside the city…what were you up to?"

Arthur scanned the crowd of counselors and guards. "Perhaps we could speak in a less public setting?" Arthur suggested quietly.

The Guardian made a sudden, sharp gesture with his hand. The two lines of guards spun on their heels and began marching out of the throne room, creating an aisle between them where the counselors and other noble types could leave as well, although this latter group did so hesitantly, without the snappy military precision of the soldiers.

Curtis shifted, glancing at the retreating counselors, and I knew he wished he could join them. He and I had been under a constant bombardment of "guidance" from our counselors since Lyra Dreide officially ended the occupation of Dicathen and Arthur left us in charge of Etistin. Not all the advice we received was what I would call "good advice," and that had only gotten worse since the dragons' arrival. Curtis, in particular, struggled to

balance his own desires with those of the people, the dragons, and our chosen council.

The truth was that we needed the dragons. We needed their power and their leadership, and the confidence it gave our people in the future. Too much had happened—the death of the kings and queens, the defeat of the Lances, the loss of the war and subsequent occupation, the destruction of Elenoir—for our people to simply expect that we could rebuild what we'd lost.

The dragons provided a new foundation on which to build, and without them, I feared the ground would always be waiting to slide right out from under our feet.

And yet…I had been raised around politics and court intrigue my entire life. I could see the manipulation of public opinion as it was happening; the dragons had silently been undercutting the people's view of Arthur. It was an "out with the old, in with the new" mentality that I understood, but it was unjust and terribly unfair to a man who had given so much to save us.

Then, he *had* been the one to bargain for the dragons' protection. I also felt it was necessary to trust that he knew what he was doing.

The last of the crowd left, and two guards worked together to shut the large throne room doors.

"Better?" Guardian Charon asked, holding his hands out to his sides as he gestured around the wide, empty space. "Now, what are you doing here? What happened?"

Arthur retold the story that Lady Sylvie had told me, although he left out the part about her apparently having witnessed the attack in a vision. Arthur, in fact, seemed to gloss over how exactly the evidence of an attack had come to him.

"Although I've eliminated one, there will be others," Arthur concluded. "I can't promise that this will dissuade their attack, either."

Charon crossed his arms and shook a lock of hair out of his face. The look of intensity he projected was one I'd seen many times before. "I assure you, I have no need of protection against Agrona's soldiers. Your earlier defeat of the Wraiths should have disabused you of this notion that they can defeat

my kind. Certainly not warriors. I promise you, Kezess did not send farmers or fledgling children in training to guard this continent."

Arthur took a couple of steps as he began to pace, then forced himself to be still. His eyes jumped to mine for the briefest instant of contact. "Even a battle where you defeated them could result in the deaths of dozens, even hundreds of the city's residents. All I'm asking is that you help me scour the city and surrounding countryside. Let's make sure they've gone."

Charon shrugged, a motion that was at odds with everything else about his posture and expression, which rarely relaxed into anything less than that rigidly militaristic. "I don't want you scaring the people of Etistin by turning the city upside down in a search for ghosts." He looked at Windsom. "See what can be done, subtly. Perhaps call in a few dragons from the patrols, faces the people here won't recognize. And they should be adept at hiding themselves among the lessers."

"Of course," Windsom said with a shallow bow.

"The presence of Agrona's most powerful forces in Dicathen only reinforces my other reason for being here, however," Arthur continued, his voice carrying the weight of words he expected not to be taken well. "I have spent some time in Alacrya, working alongside Seris Vritra, the leader of a rebel faction fighting back against Agrona."

"That is a rather generous way to phrase that," Charon rumbled, a suppressed laugh in his words.

Arthur didn't acknowledge the interruption. "I have offered Seris and any of her people that wanted to join her sanctuary in Dicathen, safely in the Elenoir Wastes with the submitted Alacryan army. Seris has asked me to extend my hand in friendship with you and your kin. She hopes that, in exchange for the protection you're already offering this continent, she can provide you with useful information about Agrona and Alacrya's defenses, among other things."

Charon's brows, left half bald and tattered by the scarring on his face, had slowly crawled upward as Arthur had spoken. For a moment, he seemed at a loss for words. "That is certainly a brave request, if not a rational one. That you can so boldly claim to have smuggled an undisclosed number of

enemy combatants into this continent, reuniting an enemy general with many thousands of her soldiers in the process, and not seem to understand the ramifications, suggests to me that perhaps your reputation for strategic brilliance is exaggerated by the people here."

I held my breath as Arthur cocked his head slightly to the side, but before he could respond, I took a quick step forward. From the corner of my eye, I saw my brother reach for my arm, but I evaded his grasp and put myself next to Arthur, directly across from the weighty gaze of Charon's dark eyes.

"Guardian Charon," I began, my words clearly enunciated and polite, "thank you for including my brother and me in this meeting. We both have come to greatly appreciate the healthy working relationship you have maintained with Etistin's new governing body, and I hope that you'll allow me to speak on Arthur's behalf. Having known him since we were children and benefited directly from his actions on multiple occasions since then, I can tell you with no hesitation or doubt that the reality of his accomplishments regularly goes well beyond the rumors that follow in his wake."

I took a breath, having rushed to get everything out before I was interrupted. Windsom was eyeing me with thinly veiled annoyance, but Charon was attentive.

"Although he has never taken steps to make it so, Arthur is looked up to by many as the de facto leader of Dicathen, uniting humans, elves, and dwarves in their respect for him. The presence of your kin here has been a blessing, Guardian, one we will never be able to repay, but not everyone has it in them to forgive the past and trust that the dragons really mean peace."

I looked between the two, mentally urging them to listen to me. "You need each other, and Dicathen needs you both, for this ever to work. Charon, I believe Arthur, as named regent of the continent, is well within his authority to offer sanctuary—"

"Regent is not a title we acknowledge," Charon said smoothly, his deep voice swallowing mine. "A title invented by invaders and handed down by a turncoat. There is no legitimacy in it." He paused thoughtfully. "But you are right besides that, of course. Our presence in Dicathen is down to this

agreement between Arthur and Lord Indrath, and I don’t intend to work against my lord’s purpose. But neither will I ignore my own best judgment.”

Before he could continue speaking, a heavy knock on the doors pulled everyone’s attention in that direction. One opened partially, but instead of a guard, Lady Sylvie Indrath walked in, her fair hair and skin practically glowing against the darkness of her horns and clothes. I felt a spike of disconcerting fear but knew that Arthur could speak with her telepathically. I could only assume her arrival at this time was by design.

“Cousin Charon,” she said, marching down the aisle toward us at speed, the soles of her boots clacking with each step.

Caera slipped through the door behind her, walking in her shadow.

Windsom’s nose wrinkled in annoyance or frustration, I couldn’t be certain which. He glared at Arthur.

But Charon gave a warm smile that softened his harsh features and broke away from our group, moving to meet Lady Sylvie. “Second cousin, thrice removed, but I suppose that doesn’t matter outside of Epheotus. Have you been slinking around the palace all this time?”

“Of course she has,” Windsom snapped, growing increasingly irritated. “Charon, Sylvie is to be returned to Lord Indrath immediately, per his very explicit instructions.” Windsom’s galaxy-colored eyes bore down on Arthur. “This is not a request, Arthur. If you value this continent, you’ll—”

“Guardian Charon, is it you or Windsom here who is in command of the dragons in Dicathen?” Arthur asked smoothly, his note of feigned curiosity like the twisting of a dagger.

“Windsom…” Charon said, his tone thick with warning.

As the two powerful asuras exchanged a long, meaningful look, my own gaze slipped away from the drama of their confrontation.

Also sharing a meaningful look behind the asuras’ backs were Arthur and Sylvie. Some silent communication drifted through the air between them, drawn on the nearly visible line of their shared eye contact.

After a handful of very long seconds, Windsom straightened his uniform and nodded.

Charon let his dark gaze linger on Windsom for a moment even afterward, then turned back to Sylvie. “Now, I believe we were having a reunion. Please, let us all go somewhere more comfortable. We have a lot to talk about.”

22

AN IMPOSSIBLE SIGHT

LYRA DREIDE

I paused in my rush from one task to the next, drawing in a deep, fortifying breath.

The sun was hanging over the mountains to the west, its final rays still warm. The near-constant breeze that blew across the wasteland had died down, lessening the fine cloud of ash that always hung in the air. It was a perfectly pleasant day, and yet I found it almost painful to relax, the effort straining against my body's urge to continue checking items off my list as fast as possible.

My duties had pulled me from one minor emergency to the next for two days straight, and I hadn't had even a brief reprieve in what felt like hours. Closing my eyes, I turned my face toward the sun, letting its warmth touch my face. A shiver ran through me…built-up tension seeking a release.

I felt my lips curve into a smile.

This…this is what being a leader is. This is what I could have been doing my whole life, if only I'd known…

Being looked up to, respected, even—dare I say—loved…it was addicting, even more than the constant climb for power and authority had been before.

Watching Seris work, working alongside her as we helped our people to come to terms with their new lives, was satisfying in a way I had never understood before. It gave me *hope*. It also, perhaps more than anything else, made me glad that Arthur Leywin hadn't killed me in Etistin. I couldn't help but second guess myself at first, but now…

It was clear I had made the correct decision.

As I let the sun kiss my skin, I felt the sharp sensation of eyes burning into my back.

Letting my eyes ease open, I slowly turned and searched for the watcher. He wasn't difficult to spot: a skinny bespectacled boy was sitting on the edge of a farm bed, now staring intently at his knees.

Slowly, he tried to sneak a quick look up, caught me watching him, went red, and stared hard at the ground.

My curiosity piqued, I started in the boy's direction, my movements unrushed in a way that I was already unaccustomed to. I felt a little bad as I watched him begin to panic, likely fearing a scolding or worse. He was one of the new arrivals, but I didn't know him or which blood he belonged to. By the tension with which he held himself and the fact that he was isolated when everyone else was hard at work, I suspected he was he was here alone, perhaps even a lower-class resident of the Relictombs' second level who snuck through during Seris's exodus.

I stood over him, my arms crossed, lips pursed slightly. "Have I wronged you, boy?" I asked. "You're staring as if you've sworn a blood oath of vengeance on me." Cocking my head slightly, I added, "Considering everything, I suppose that is possible."

He flinched, glanced up at me, looked away, looked back again, then pulled his legs up to his chest and seemed to shrink.

I relaxed, softening my expression and stance. "At ease, child. I only meant to startle some good humor out of you. Why don't we start again? I'm sure you know my name already, but I'm Lyra. Who are you?"

He chewed the inside of his lip, the spinning gears of his thoughts visible in his eyes, then finally hopped to his feet and bowed. "I'm sorry, Lyra of

Highblood Dreide. I didn’t mean to stare. I just…” He swallowed heavily. “I’m Seth of Highblood Milview.”

Milview…Milview? I rolled the name around, searching for any connection to it. I was slightly surprised to hear him name himself as a highblood, but less so that I didn’t know anything about the name.

“Where is the rest of your blood then?” I asked, eager to ensure bloods weren’t being separated as they were relocated away from the small settlement where they had arrived, which could not support all of them.

The boy’s face sank, and I realized the truth. “You’re all alone, then?” I asked. “Was your blood lost in the war?”

He nodded, a very slight, nervous movement, then sank back onto the wooden border of the raised farm bed. “They were all killed…here.” He waved a hand at the ashlands beyond the small village. “Recently elevated blood…because of something my sister did in the war. And then wiped away, just like that.”

I sat next to him, considering my words carefully. “You never felt like a highblood, did you?”

He shook his head. “Not really. The others at the academy…well, they didn’t treat me like I was their equal. Not until…” He swallowed heavily. “Not until Professor Grey…Arthur.”

“Ah,” I said, recalling what little I had learned of Arthur Leywin’s time hidden in Alacrya. “You are one of his students, then. Is that why you came to Dicathen? To follow your mentor?”

“No!” he said, too quickly. Blanching, he glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “I mean, I just didn’t have anywhere else to go. Scythe Seris wanted to know more about my bestowals, me and my friend, and I just thought, well, maybe here at least I could do…something?” He shrugged rather helplessly. “I didn’t think I could return to my blood’s home or the academy. Not after everything.”

I pressed my lips into a tight smile, not saying anything else. Clearly the boy needed to talk, and I was prepared to let him. At least, with what little time I had to spare.

He hopped up again and took a couple of steps away, facing the gray wasteland to the north. “Why did Circe have to die just for…that?” he asked. “She died mapping a way through it, that’s what we were told. But now look at it. She died for *nothing*.”

Milview…

The name settled into place in my mind, bringing back a report received ages ago. A large number of Sentries had been tasked with charting a path through the enchanted forests of the elves, and it had been a young and talented Sentry named Circe of Named Blood Milview who had finally succeeded where her peers had failed.

“Many died needlessly in this war,” I said, still sitting. “The asura are heedless with lesser lives. But, perhaps…” I paused, letting the words hang. “Perhaps their deaths aren’t for nothing if they show us that the world needs to change. If they motivate us to make that very change. That seems to me like a more worthy cause to fight for.”

The boy didn’t respond, and my attention was drawn to an approaching figure. Anvald of Named Blood Torpor’s broad shoulders and shaved scalp were obvious even from a distance.

I stood and stretched, feeling my brief reprieve coming to an end. “I could use the assistance of a motivated young mage,” I said, resting my hand lightly on the boy’s shoulder. “If you are willing. And I’m sure we can find time for you to continue to help Seris in her research as well.”

He stared at me, his eyes wide and watery. Clearing his throat, he removed his glasses and wiped the back of his arm across his face. “Uh, sure,” he said, fumbling the thick lenses back over his eyes.

Anvald came to a stop several feet away, looking grim. “Lady Seris has requested your presence, Lyra.”

I didn’t bother asking what this was about. The fact that Seris was requesting me meant it had to do with some conflict between the new arrivals and those Alacryan soldiers who had been consigned to the Elenoir Wastes by Regent Leywin.

“Come along then, assistant,” I said, only a little flippantly. Although I didn’t look back, I heard Seth’s halting footsteps behind me. “What is it now, Anvald? Some new construction interrupting a used-to-be highblood’s view of the endless ashy wastes?”

Anvald snorted. “Ah, better that I do not color your view of the matter.”

Curious, I followed the ascender in silence until we reached the open doorway of the village meeting hall, a small, slapdash building we had left empty for meetings and such, just to make things feel a little more officious.

Anvald stepped aside and waved me in. As I stepped through, my eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim light, but I began to make out what sounded like a long-running argument.

“—blood Vassere lacks the standing to claim authority over Highblood Ainsworth soldiers,” the strong voice of an older man was saying. “We have few enough left. I won’t have them drawn off to other duties when they should be protecting me, my wife, and my heir, do you understand? After everything we’ve done for this movement, everything we’ve sacrificed, to now be asked to bend the knee to this…this…”

I squinted slightly, and my eyes adjusted enough to see Baldur Vassere try and fail not to roll his eyes. “I’m not—ugh, surely, Scythe Seris, you can see that I’m only trying to—”

“Again, I’d like to remind everyone that blood station carries no weight at all in this new nation of Alacryans,” Corbett of Highblood Denoir interrupted.

No, just Corbett Denoir, I reminded myself, the thought reinforced by the man’s own words.

“As of two days ago, we all agreed to move forward as equals,” he finished.

I moved to flank Baldur, with whom I had worked closely since this prison-turned-refuge was formed for the Alacryan soldiers. Arthur himself had put Baldur in charge of rounding up the first Alacryans from the armies around Blackbend and guiding them into the wasteland.

Seth didn’t follow but lingered next to the door.

Seris's brows rose slightly as she addressed my arrival. "Some of those who came with me have questioned Baldur Vassere's leadership, Lyra. I believe Ector here suggested that a 'second-tier cousin of a second-tier highblood' had no right to be giving orders to such potent highbloods as Frost and Ainsworth. It strikes me that this is, perhaps, exactly the right time to see some proof of this new societal concept of ours…one in which the 'purity' of one's blood, as determined by the Vritra, is not in fact the end-all be-all of one's worth."

I nodded in understanding. "The leaders of this society must be people who have earned the right through action, whom their peers look to as leaders willingly, with acceptance, hope, and most of all, trust. Baldur Vassere has been that leader here. It was he who laid the foundations for the earliest encampments, gathering the defeated, despondent, furious remains of the Alacryan army and keeping them from imploding long enough to form a pipeline for food and water, as well as build a handful of ramshackle structures to keep the sun from baking them."

I met the eyes of those around me in turn: Ector Ainsworth, Lars Isenhaert, Corbett Denoir, a mage by the name of Udon Plainsrunner who worked closely with Baldur, and Baldur himself, who turned to give me a weak smile.

"For your entire lives, you have held up shields of worry and paranoia, considering the implication of even the smallest interactions with other highbloods as you struggled to make space for yourselves and your bloods—your *families*—in the midst of the never-ending feeding frenzy that was Alacryan politics.

"Now is the time to lay down those shields, gentlemen. You are no longer jockeying for position among your peers but working to ensure our collective survival," I finished.

I shot Seris a glance to gauge her reaction, a reflexive motion I couldn't help despite the message I'd just delivered to the others. It would take us all more than a couple of days to put aside a lifetime of hierarchy.

Ector Ainsworth crossed his arms and looked away. Lars seemed to be taking his cues from Ector, while Corbett Denoir had the look of one who

was both eager and deeply tired. Udon and Baldur, both soldiers who were not used to this kind of politics, shuffled uncomfortably.

“Perhaps we could take this conversation out into the village,” I suggested, moving toward the doorway. I gestured for Seth to go through ahead of me. “There are others I would like to introduce you to, leaders among the people here. Not by virtue of their military station or bloodline, but by their hard work, talent, and self-sacrifice.”

Although the tension was still clear, especially from Ector, they all followed Seth and me out into the sunshine.

“Our mages with earth-affinity type runes have been invaluable,” I said, gesturing to the building we’d just left. “Along with the handful of mages in the wastes who had prior experience with the construction and conjuration of buildings. Perhaps you don’t recognize it now, but the simple act of building a few houses was completely essential for our success here, and we owe much to those who were instrumental in the process.”

Ector, Lars, and Corbett examined the structure unenthusiastically, clearly not enthralled by the explanation. I had to admit, the simple square building, formed of gray brick crafted from the ash, supported by timbers from the Beast Glades, and roofed with wavy interlocking tiles of colorless clay didn’t paint an idyllic picture, especially for those coming from huge mansions designed by Alacrya’s best architects and Instillers, but function, in this case, was many times more important than form. In the end, I hoped only that they would see the purpose of the structures and the importance of the people behind them.

After giving them a moment to examine the building, I led them to a nearby patch of farmland, introducing them to Udon’s brother, Idir, a soldier previously stationed in Xyrus who was now one of our most proficient cultivators of fertile soil brought in from the Beast Glades.

“An entire army at our disposal, and yet we suffer for a lack of builders and farmers,” Lars murmured to Ector.

“On the contrary,” I chided, “we have more than enough of both. They only lack for training and practice. Thankfully, plenty of that is in supply for anyone willing to try their hand at something new.”

Lars shuffled uncomfortably and cleared his throat, but he apparently had nothing else to say.

It was as we turned away from the plot of farmland that something in the air changed.

Seris sensed it first, her head snapping around to the south. Cylrit, who had been flanking her like a shadow, shifted quickly into a defensive stance in front of her. I followed the line of their serious stares into the trees of the Beast Glades. An instant later, it hit me as well.

An intensely potent mana signature, accompanied by a desperately crushing intent, was rushing toward us, flying over the wild tangle of forestland and growing stronger by the moment.

A ripple went through the gathered mages, wiping away all thought of the conversation we'd been having. But it wasn't only the handful of us present. Idir and three others tended the farmland while dozens of Alacryans milled about, some carrying timber to new construction, others buckets of water, some only loitering, unsure what to do. Nearby, a handful of children were sitting with a girl with short golden hair as she taught them about magic.

They all felt it.

Beside me, Seth Milview grabbed my sleeve, his hands shaking.

As the pressure built, some couldn't help but step back, reeling from the weight of it even at this distance. Others, I was worried to see, stumbled toward the signature, jaws slack and faces expectant, almost reverent. Hopeful.

Fools, I thought absently, my own internal voice distant and quiet, as if my mind had already retreated away from the approaching power.

Seris burst into action, taking command and issuing orders. "Ainsworth, Denoir, start gathering the bloods. Ensure people stay together, keep order, don't allow a panic to sweep our number. Those who are already preparing to leave the village, get them moving. Vassere, organize a retreat into the wasteland. Anyone who remains here could be a danger to us or themselves. Split the village east and west, toward the next towns in line. Go!"

I took a few steps forward, pulling Seth with me as I squinted over the trees in search of the signature's source. "There," I said, although it came out barely a whisper.

A winged creature, massive and black and the night sky, flew into view, sweeping low over the trees. In seconds, it was wheeling above us, a harsh cry issuing from its enormous maw.

My mind reeled. A *Vritra*, in its fully transformed state…

To see a basilisk flying the skies of Dicathen…such a thing hadn't been seen in Alacrya in my lifetime. Seeing one here, now…it seemed the height of impossibility.

All I could think was that Seris's escape from the Relictombs had finally prompted Agrona to take extreme action and end our fledgling offshoot nation of soldiers and rebels.

With the suddenness of a falling catapult stone, the basilisk descended, landing half in one of the farm beds, its clawed feet churning the ground, ripping up the crops, and sending the farmers sprawling, their shouts nearly lost in the noise of the huge wings beating against the warm, late-afternoon air.

Seth stumbled and fell backward, but I couldn't pull my gaze away from the sight of the basilisk in front of me.

Even through my fear, it was truly a sight to behold.

Its body was a single long serpentine trunk plated with pitch-black scales and lined with spines from the end of its whiplike tail to the base of its thick neck. Six powerful limbs protruded from the long body, each ending in a claw tipped with talons like scythes, and four thin, leathery wings grew from above the forelimbs, now curled around the basilisk's squirming body like a protective shield.

The reptilian head snapped side to side, glowering around at the village, its maw opening and closing to reveal the dark void of its gullet, the accompanying snap rending the air like the shattering of stone, the smell of raw meat and sulfur making my stomach churn.

Its tail twitched back and forth, splintering a withered tree and scything over the heads of the paralyzed children.

Its blazing red eyes, four on each side of the elongated face, searched each and every person present.

Like it is deciding which of us to devour first, I couldn't help but think.

But the basilisk's aura was frantic and punishing, striking us like the incoming tide on a stormy morning. It was uncontrolled and wild, not the weaponized intent of a greater being but an untamed manifestation of… abject terror? It was difficult to conceive, especially with the weight of it crushing me to the spot.

Seris's orders had not survived the basilisk's sudden landing, and I could no longer tell the difference between reverence and horror on the faces of those around me. All were frozen, every pair of eyes locked on the asura. No one moved at all.

No one except Seris, who strode forward, somehow unbent by the pressure.

The reptilian head, large enough to swallow ten lessers in a single strike, snapped around, all eight eyes focusing on her. "Scythe…" Its voice was like the blades of a saw ripping through hard wood and the shearing of metal beneath a hurricane wind.

Even Seris couldn't entirely disguise her fear as she faced the basilisk, her stance too rigid, her chin raised too high. "Sovereign Oludari Vritra…"

I felt my stomach clench painfully. Not just any basilisk, but the Sovereign of Truacia. I had met him before but didn't recognize his mana in this form. But that wasn't what made me feel on the verge of sickness.

There was no reason for a Sovereign to appear in Dicathen. The High Sovereign would not have sent Oludari to extinguish us, nor would Oludari have decided to take on such a task himself. It simply wasn't the way things were done. The Sovereigns hardly ever left their own dominions. They were paranoid and possessive, ever watchful and guarded. With Oludari being the last of the Sovereigns, he should have been taking every precaution against…

The last of the Sovereigns…fleeing to Dicathen…

What does that mean? I asked myself, struggling to hold onto sense.

He began to transform, shrinking as the powerful limbs became arms and legs, the serpentine body coalescing into the upright form of a man. Wings fell behind his bent back and became a part of the dark battlerobes clinging to his thin frame. The pointed, gap-mawed face flattened until Oludari's pale visage was recognizable, his ruby eyes staring at us, two spiraling horns pointing toward the sky above them.

Oludari, on the couple of occasions I had witnessed him in person, had been impassive and focused. Now, there was a manic wildness in his eyes that I couldn't have imagined seeing from an asura, and his face was twisted with a fear so palpable and unexpected that it was difficult to look at, for seeing it made me want to bolt into the wastes and never look back.

Oludari surged forward, and I couldn't help but stumble away, unable to keep my composure.

My senses left me as I struggled to understand what I was seeing. It looked, to my eyes, as if the Sovereign threw himself at Seris's feet, his pale, shaking hands clawing at the hem of her robes. Bleating words scratched out of his throat and between his teeth, my mind knitting together their meaning with all the efficiency of a boiled egg.

"Scythe Seris…the last, I'm the last…going to kill me, too, I just know it! You must help me. Escape, return to Epheotus, but I can't…the portal, the rift, I can *feel* it, but I cannot *find* it! You must help me, I…I command it! Please?"

23

CHANGES

“PLEASE?”

Seris was still as stone as Oludari pawed at her, his expectant, pleading face turned upward.

It seemed like something out of a nightmare. No piece of reality as I had been made to understand it fit properly with what I was seeing.

“I have so much work left undone…” Oludari whined, his spiderish fingers kneading at Seris’s robes. “There are layers and layers and layers to the world, just *waiting* to be peeled back, one by one, but not if I’m gone. Agrona thinks he’s the only one who knows, but I’ve seen the shadows, I’ve felt the rising surface tension of a bubble ready to burst, I…”

The Sovereign choked on his own whimpering and began to cough, his shoulders shaking. When the fit passed, he drooped like a wilted plant.

Blinking as if waking from a deep sleep, Seris glanced around at the frozen crowd, then at Cylrit, and finally to me. For half a second, there was a question in her eyes, one I had no clue how to answer. “What do I do?” her eyes were asking, but even as they touched mine, her expression hardened into resolve as she came to some answer of her own devising.

Slowly, Seris pressed her hand against Oludari's cheek. "Calm yourself, Sovereign."

Oludari suddenly took two fistfuls of Seris's robes and pulled her down a few inches. "Help me! Hide me! The dragons, the Lance, you…you know them! You've foiled him before. I don't understand how, but you have! I command you to do it again! So…so has the Lance. Yes, take me to him. To Arthur Leywin."

Seris firmly wrenched herself free of his grip, then, with the suddenness of a striking thundertail, slapped him hard across the face.

The Sovereign's head snapped to the side, his blubbering cutting off sharply. "H-how dare you, I….I…"

"Get yourself together," Seris said, seeming more in control of herself now. She held out her hand, and Oludari took it, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet.

The spell over the crowd broke, and most began hurrying away, disappearing into the village. Udon rushed to his brother, helping him up and brushing dirt off his clothes, but Idir pushed him off, hurrying to one of the other farmers.

That farmer, like all the others, was prone, unmoving. I could already feel it in the fading of their mana signatures; they were all dead.

I looked away, angry and frustrated but unsure how to channel my emotions. *The carelessness of the asura…*

More than a few people lingered, slowly coming closer, their rapturous gazes locked on the Sovereign, apparently oblivious to his current sad state.

"Sovereign. Please, forgive us—"

"—take us home—"

"—only what we must to survive, Sovereign!"

Cylrit slashed his hand through the air, and the rambling pleas went silent, and the people fell back. All except for Lars Isenhaert, who rushed toward the Sovereign.

Oludari's eyes went wide, and mana spilled out of him.

Isenhaert was lifted from the ground and sent flying back into the crowd, knocking down a couple of others. It was enough to finally break their rapture, and they practically stampeded over one another to escape, leaving Lars moaning on the ground. Corbett, Ector, and a woman I recognized as one of Lars's soldiers hurried to his side.

Seris shot me a look. "We need to get the Sovereign somewhere safer…for everyone." She trailed off, her focus shifting past me into the distance.

I turned to look, and my blood ran cold.

On the horizon, the Grand Mountains cut the Elenoir Wastes and the Beast Glades off from the rest of Dicathen. Only moments ago, the snow-capped peaks had been lost in thick white fog. Now, a low black cloud was racing over the mountains. Even as I watched, though, it dipped down the steep cliffs, cascading to the flat ashlands below, and billowed toward us at great speed.

"No," Oludari moaned. "No no no. He knows. He *found me*." Oludari took Seris by the hand, squeezing so tightly that she winced.

"Wraiths…" Seris breathed, pulling herself free of the Sovereign and taking a few halting steps so she was next to me. Her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at her sides.

My frayed nerves shattered. Moving as if in a dream, I turned away from the cloud. My gaze swept across the panicked village, taking in all the people I had worked so hard to protect and help to thrive after the war, people I considered my friends…*family*, even, to use the Dicathian word.

A better word than 'blood,' my near-delirious mind offered up.

Among them were those who had lived these last months in the wasteland, building homes here, learning new skills, putting their hard-won magic to work as farmers, hunters, and craftsmen instead of soldiers…killers. People like the Plainsrunner brothers, like Baldur Vassere. Like the children now huddling around the golden-haired Frost girl, green with fright.

I looked down at Seth, who was still lying on the ground at my feet, his glasses askew. He, like everyone else here, would become nothing but compost to feed the infertile ashen wasteland if caught in a battle between a Vritra basilisk and a battle group of Wraiths.

And there was nothing I could do to stop it.

I had power, incredible magic, and yet next to these beings I was no more dangerous than an unad slave…

"—yra!"

The shouting of my name cut through my brain fog, and I jerked spasmodically. Seris gripped my arm, pulling me to face her. "Find your calm, Lyra, your courage. Discard the rest, it won't help you now."

I stared into her eyes, wondering, not for the first time, where this inner strength of hers came from.

I hadn't known Scythe Seris Vritra well before the war. As a wartime nomination for the position of retainer, I hadn't been in that club prior to being sent to Dicathen. But I had proven adept at getting the Dicathians to fall in line with minimal bloodshed, and that had aligned with Agrona's goals for the continent.

During those couple of days working alongside Seris, I had felt repeated pangs of jealousy at the relationship between her and Cylrit. My own Scythe, Cadell, had been cold, distant, and violent. In two days, I felt like I knew more about Seris than I ever had Cadell. My relationship with him had been a matter of military necessity and nothing more, although I had foolishly coveted his strength and the latitude with which the High Sovereign allowed him to do his work.

Doing as Seris said, I layered these thoughts around myself like a weighted blanket, the mental equivalent of a child pulling her comforter up over her head to hide from the mana beasts under the bed…

But it worked, and I felt myself calming. Seris may not have been my Scythe—abyss, she wasn't even *a* Scythe anymore—but she had already inspired me, being a better mentor than Cadell or any other teacher or trainer I'd had in my ascension through the ranks of power.

There was no time to do anything else before the Wraiths arrived.

The cloud split into four distinct forms, and several spells rained down on us at once, aimed at Oludari.

I hurled out a barrier of void wind to block a gout of black fire, the collateral damage of which was set to overtake not only Seris, Cylrit, and me, but a dozen other Alacryans who were still trying to get away.

The Wraith's soulfire ate through the fabric of my shield, but a second barrier appeared within mine, and a third supported that, redirecting the soulfire to roll harmlessly over us before spilling across three freshly built houses and engulfing them instantly.

As we struggled with the flames, twin bolts of lightning flashed, one striking the ground in the midst of the fleeing crowd, sending up a spray of dark ash and throwing those nearest to the ground, including Corbett and Ector. The other hit Oludari squarely but deflected off his mana barrier before crashing into a distant tree, splitting it in two and causing the dry leaves to burn like so many little candles.

The noise of splintering wood and roaring flames was still ringing in my ears as I felt the surge of mana from below. Seris and Cylrit were already moving, flying into the air and conjuring shields over the screaming bystanders. I grabbed Seth and pulled him into the air just as the ground around Oludari surged upward, a field of blood iron spikes stabbing through as the Wraiths struck from every direction at once.

Oludari clenched his fists, and the blood iron shattered with an ear-splitting shriek. His face was taut with panic and desperation, his intent cascading through the village like a hurricane.

A shadow manifested between us, and the sun glinted off carved blades as they cut toward the Sovereign. His hand snapped up, catching the sword, and with a jerk of his closed fist, he shattered it. His bleeding hand knifed outward, releasing a wide crescent of soulfire that only barely missed me and Seth, but the Wraith had already vanished again.

There was a lull.

Oludari glared into the sky, where the four Wraiths encircled the village at a distance, their killing intent like four raging wildfires closing in on us. The Sovereign grimaced, opening and closing his hand as blood seeped from the small cut he had taken. Sickly green tendrils discolored his pale flesh around the wound.

“Poison,” I whispered to myself.

Oludari snarled, quickly scanning his surroundings, looking for a way out. His demeanor hardened, fear being pushed aside by the will to survive. Grimacing, he shot up into the sky past me.

His body lengthened, swelling with mana as the monster hidden within the humanoid form burst out. He seemed somehow even larger than before, the beating of his wings so fierce it knocked me off balance, his squalling roar enough to take my breath away.

His tail lashed like a giant whip, and a Wraith dipped beneath it. His jaws snapped, closing just short of a retreating shape in the sky. The third Wraith came from the side, taking advantage of Oludari’s distraction to land on the basilisk’s back with twin blades of black ice gleaming in his hands. The last rays of the sun shimmered off the edges as they sheared across the base of an enormous wing. The ice shattered like glass, and the basilisk roared and spun in the air, sending the Wraith flying.

Fat droplets of dark blood rained down on the encampment below.

As Oludari thrashed and roared, a black web knit itself into the air right in front of him, thin filaments of blood iron affixed to points of condensed shadow. The basilisk tried to veer away, but too late, and crashed at full speed into the webbing.

His bulk drove him through, shattering the construct, but even from below, I could see the network of thin, bloody gashes left all over his serpentine face and body. The blood iron net caught in Oludari’s wings and jaw, sawing back and forth with every movement, cutting more deeply.

A dozen bolts of lightning converged on the metal, wracking Oludari with spasms as it raced along the metal and into the hundreds of little wounds, the two spells working together to bypass the Sovereign’s protective layer

of mana. More of the sickly green tendrils were spreading from the cuts on his wings, and heavy ice was condensing along the metal, the weight of it dragging the Sovereign down.

The blood weeping from the cuts suddenly lit on fire, soul flames burning away the blood iron and black ice, and sealing the wounds. On the ground, everywhere a drop of flaming blood fell, it roared and caught alight everything nearby.

A black mist appeared to hover over the crowd, shifting rapidly to absorb as much of the raining, burning blood as possible: Seris's nullification magic, eating it away before it could spread any further.

Still, half the village was already a conflagration.

The streets were full of running people now, going every direction in their confusion, leaderless and rudderless as each was left to fend for themselves.

Contradictory orders were shouted with a dozen disparate voices; helpless highbloods wailed for their guards and attendants; and through it all was easily discernible the keening of the wounded and dying as Vritra soulfire coursed through their blood.

The only leader worth her salt was the Frost girl, who had taken the group of children in her care and was leading them toward the Beast Glades and away from the battle.

Shaking free of the enthrallment I had felt at watching the Sovereign battle these Wraiths, I pummeled the dry, hard soil below with a wave of sonic vibration, simultaneously pulling at the ground as it softened, the ash moving like liquid under my power, and dumped the gray slurry atop as many flames as I could, burying entire houses where I could sense no mana signatures.

Above, Oludari closed on a Wraith, his jaws opening to unleash a torrent of black flames.

The Wraith launched upward over the fire, spun, and plunged down atop the speeding basilisk, dozens of knives conjured from dark ice hailing down around him.

Those that didn’t strike Oludari pummeled Seris’s spell. Most dissolved harmlessly, but enough made it through to shred the buildings and people beneath them. I could do nothing but watch as bodies tumbled to the ground, blood running freely from holes punched cleanly through them.

Oludari screeched, his long neck and head twisting at random as soulfire continued to spill from his jaws. Below, another house went up in flames, then another. The wind kicked up by the battle sent sparks drifting all the way to the Beast Glades, and I could already see little lines of smoke curling up from the dense forest.

Everything had happened so quickly; people were still picking themselves up from the initial lightning strike. Ector stumbled away from the crater, his hand pressed to his ear, his eyes unfocused. Something exploded. Almost as if in slow motion, I watched as he was lifted off the ground, a jagged shard of broken blood iron piercing his chest. His body tumbled inhumanly for several feet, and by the time it stopped, I knew he was dead.

The faces of the crowd blurred, the details lost among the smoke and the shadows. Someone else went up in a gout of black flames, their scream choked out as the oxygen burned from their lungs. Another was buried as a house collapsed just as they ran past it, the outer wall swallowing them.

On the fringes of the encampment, small figures were pouring out into the flat gray emptiness.

I threw up another shield as a gust of wind pushed the flames of a nearby building too close to a group of retreating villagers, giving them time to drag themselves away from it.

Desperately, I searched for Seris through the chaos, hoping to find some guidance or direction, but what I saw instead wrapped an icy fist around my frantically beating heart.

Cylrit was holding Seris up, his arm around her waist as she continued to channel her void spell, one arm wrapped around his neck, the other directing the mist like a conductor with an orchestra, absorbing and unmaking as many stray attacks as she could.

But…she had arrived in Dicathen weakened by her long trials in the Relictombs. I had known that. But I hadn't, I saw now, really *understood* it.

She hadn't shown anyone the truth, keeping the face she presented to the world stoic and capable. But a lifetime of practice at putting up a strong front didn't correct an overstrained core. And her unique void wind technique took a significant amount of mana to channel, so much that she had already put herself on the edge of backlash countering such powerful spells.

And the battle has only just begun.

It was at that moment I truly understood the reality of our situation.

Oludari was powerful—a full-blooded asura—but he was no warrior. Already, I could sense his strength flagging, his desperation building. The sickly green tendrils that discolored his black scales radiated a discomforting mana that made my stomach churn, and I knew it must be some kind of poison, perhaps even made specifically for this purpose…

It was clear that the Wraiths would do what they were trained to do. Even as Oludari attacked two or three at once, the fourth was always able to land a strike against the Sovereign, their offense and defense woven together in a mesmerizing concert of dealing damage and death. There was no way Oludari could win. They would kill him, and there was nothing we could do to stop them.

Then they would turn on us.

A frantic thought to reach out to Arthur for help flailed in my head, but I knew that wasn't possible. He was far away in Etistin, and I had no way to—

"Seris!" Still holding Seth against my side, I flew up to her, dodging as a broken black spike careened through the air from above. "The tempus warp, where—"

She pulled a brooch off her robes and tossed it to me. I immediately imbued it with mana, sensing its contents. Among a variety of supplies and gear was the tempus warp, and I drew it out and plunged to the ground, releasing the breathless Seth Milview so I could focus on the artifact.

It was a powerful one, capable of reaching from one continent to the other. It would have no problem getting me to the palace in Etistin, where I only had to find Arthur. How long would it take? A minute? Two? Ten?

Will anyone here be alive by the time I—

Even as my mana activated and calibrated the tempus warp, a shadow appeared in front of me, casting the artifact in a deeper darkness than the cover of smoke and void mist already provided.

I had only one painful thud of my heart to consider the narrow, pale, axe-like face in front of me before he lashed out with a forward kick at my chest.

The air between us distorted, black lines of sonic vibration rippling visibly for an instant before his blow struck home, shattering my defenses.

The world pulled away from me—or I from it—and space seemed to rush by in an instant.

I hit the ground hard, tumbling like a ragdoll.

My core ached from the force of the impact as I instinctively felt for my mana, grabbing the ground and pulling it up and around me, a cushioning barricade to halt my wild roll. Before I could even wrap my head around what had happened, I was back on my feet and flying toward the tempus warp and the Wraith standing over it.

He raised the index finger of his right hand, shaking it back and forth as if scolding a naughty child. Then his black blades of conjured ice swept down, carving through the tempus warp as easily as soft butter.

Only a couple of feet away, Seth stood paralyzed—but no, he wasn't frozen. He was moving…*casting*, channeling mana into his runes. Blue light spilled out of the boy, creating a magical barrier that extended a few feet in every direction from his core. *A Shield emblem?* But that didn't seem right…

The barrier hit the Wraith as it swelled, knocking him back half a step. A cold sneer appeared on that axe-like face, and then his blade was swinging.

I threw out my hands, drawing stone up from the barren ash outside of Seth's own shield and conjuring a field of absorbing static, but the blade was too fast, too strong. It sliced through both my half-formed spells, then met the blue barrier.

Seth's spell shattered, the force of it sending him crashing to the ground at my feet, the blur of ice-formed blades in the air where he had been.

In the empty second I had to react, I considered whether I could protect him or not. Was it worth giving up my life to delay his death by the blink of an eye? If I fled, perhaps the Wraith would follow me instead of focusing on the boy, who was insignificant in the Wraith's eyes.

Once, perhaps, I'd have killed him myself, just to remove the distraction.

Goosebumps rose all over my skin, and I leapt over Seth and fell into a crouch, holding up my arm and channeling mana without forming a spell yet. I swallowed hard, some well of emotion emptying inside of me. Even though I couldn't hope to protect the boy, I couldn't do nothing. *At least he will die knowing I tried…*

The Wraith cocked his head, regarding me. His blood-red eyes, dark and soulless, filled with…was it pity I saw reflected back at me? With another sneer, he shot into the air and sped back toward the battle with Oludari.

Spinning on my knees, I felt the boy's face, his neck, searching for any signs of life but expecting the worst. There was no breath, no pulse, no rising and falling of his chest—

The faint *bump bump* pressed against my fingertips, and I closed my eyes in relief. He was alive but unconscious, his core screaming as he suffered backlash from channeling such a powerful spell through his emblem.

A roar shook the ground, snapping my eyes back open and dragging them skyward.

Oludari was falling, plunging out of the air, cuts in the fabric of his wings flapping against the rushing wind of his passage, blood weeping from a thousand wounds across his gargantuan body. No longer intimidating, his wounded basilisk form instead filled me with a deep sense of dread, like a tattered flag falling and marking the end of the battle.

When he hit the ground, it was as if a meteor struck. A dozen buildings vanished beneath his bulk before a cloud of dust and ash swallowed him. Four black figures moved into formation above, encircling the basilisk before drifting slowly to the ground.

Seris and Cylrit did the same next to me. Cylrit appeared to be taking the majority of her weight on himself. His gray skin had gone nearly white, and a fine sheen of sweat clung to his brow. He, like the Scythe he protected, had pushed himself to the limit of his abilities.

We were alone, or nearly so. Everyone else had fled, at least those who were capable. Many, far too many, had perished in the crossfire. With a weary glance, I found the corpses of Ector Ainsworth, both the Plainsrunner brothers, and Anvald Torpor. There were others I couldn't identify as easily. And that was just in the space directly around me.

How many have died across the encampment? I wondered despite myself, then pushed the question away.

I sensed the change in the mana as Oludari reverted to his humanoid form. His silhouette appeared through the ash as he stumbled, coughing, free of the rubble his fall had created. The Wraiths were waiting for him.

"P-please," he coughed, sounding utterly pathetic. "I'll go back, I will, just don't…don't…" He fell to his knees coughing, his thin body wracking horribly. He was still bleeding from a dozen wounds, and his flesh was completely covered in the green tendrils. "Don't kill me," he finished weakly.

One of the Wraiths, a lithe, graceful woman in black and gray leather and chain armor, clicked her tongue. She brushed jet black hair out of her face, tucking it behind one of the horns that swept back from her forehead, and took a step toward the Sovereign. He flinched, and she chuckled darkly.

"Your life is not ours to take this day, oh great Sovereign." Her hand snapped out and gripped one of his horns. "Although we are not required to return you in one piece, should you think to challenge us further."

Black lightning crackled from her fist to dance down the horn and into Oludari's skull. He groaned, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he

slumped to the ground unconscious.

The Wraith scoffed and turned away, her deep red eyes, so dark they were almost black, searching the village and landing on Seris, Cylrit, and me. She started walking toward us, her stride as casual as if she were strolling along Central Boulevard in Cargidan City.

The axe-faced Wraith who had destroyed the tempus warp moved in behind her and scooped up the asura, tossing him over one shoulder. The other two moved to his side, and I got a good look at them for the first time. One was missing an arm, and half his face was cracked, blackened, and bleeding. The other had tears of blood leaking from his eyes and a vacant expression on his otherwise stalwart face.

At least Oludari didn't go down without a fight, I thought vaguely, immediately recognizing how strange it was to find myself on the Sovereign's side, considering.

"Seris the Unblooded. Retainers Cylrit and Lyra." She smiled, revealing elongated canines, then glanced around at the smoldering ruins of the village. "This *is* interesting."

Cylrit leveled his blade at the Wraith, his intent pressing outward to add weight to his words as he said, "Return to your shadows, ghost. The fact that we're still breathing tells me your master hasn't commanded you to bite, only to show your teeth."

Her smile hardened into something more dangerous as she ran her tongue over one protruding canine. "You're right, although I wouldn't trust my leash should you keep barking, boy. The High Sovereign's disappointment would be…mild at best if I returned with your heads mounted proudly on the Sovereign's horns."

"Perhata, quit playing with your food," the axe-faced Wraith shouted. "We have what we came for, and the others are in need of healing."

"It's just an arm," the burned Wraith grumbled, looking down at his ruined side. "I could still mop up these three traitors if—"

The woman, Perhata, raised a hand, and the others went silent. "Victory ripped from the jaws of defeat, as it were. We hadn't even heard of

Oludari's flight from Alacrya when we sensed him bumbling about in the Beast Glades. Had your Dicathian friend, the Lance, not interrupted our previous work, we might not have made it here in time." Her smile sharpened yet further, like a dagger slash across her face. "Really, without this Lance—Arthur Leywin?—a couple dragons would be dead, but a lot more Alacryans would be alive."

I scoffed. "If you don't intend to kill us, then you better be on your way. After all, you don't want to risk facing off against Arthur, do you?"

Seris shot me a warning look, but my blood was burning too hot to feel chastised. "I recognize your name, Wraith. It was one even Cadell said with a note of fear. Named among the nameless and faceless…you must truly be a terror on the battlefield. And yet, I notice there are only four of you—well, three and a half. I always thought there were meant to be five Wraiths to a battle group. Could even you not defend your battle group against the Godspell?"

Axe-face took a few aggressive steps forward. "What you've always thought is worth less than the rag I clean my ass with, you slag."

Again, Perhata gestured for quiet. She tilted her head slightly as she regarded Seris. When a lock of dark hair fell out, she again placed it back behind her horns. "You are granted a reprieve today. These soldiers still belong to Agrona, and you are their generals. Soon, they'll be needed again. The time to play farmer and backwater governor is over. When Agrona gives the order, you and your forces will march. They will fight for him, because if they don't, Agrona will burn the cores from every member of every traitorous blood on either side of the great ocean."

She stepped forward until Cylrit's blade pressed into her sternum. Her presence alone was enough to make my knees quake.

Her eyes settled on Seris's. "Personally, I hope you defy him. I'll *beg* to be the one who gets to return here and rip the core from your chest, Unblooded, for you are a shadow of what you once were. But the reality is, we all know you won't. You can't. When Agrona gives the order, you will answer. It is the only way." Casually, she reached up and wrapped her fist around Cylrit's sword. With a subtle twist, the blade shattered.

Cylrit gasped and dropped the hilt onto the hard-packed ash, staring at his shaking hand in disbelief.

“Soon,” Perhata said again, taking a few steps backward before spinning around and signaling to the other Wraiths.

The four of them flew into the air and sped north over the wasteland, vanishing in seconds. The pressure of their mana, though, lasted much longer, and when that had faded, there was the emptiness it left behind.

Seris sagged, and Cylrit eased her gently to the ground. Her eyes were closed, her breathing labored.

Cylrit’s eyes met mine. “Go. Tell Arthur what happened. I will—”

Seris’s hand lifted, silencing Cylrit as he kneeled next to her. She opened it, revealing a disc about an inch and a half in diameter. It was yellow-white in color, and a rune had been carved into it. From the rusty reddish-brown coloration of the rune, it was inked in blood.

“Give this…to Arthur,” Seris said, her voice hoarse with fatigue.

I carefully took the disc from her hand, remembering Seris’s pained expression as Oludari crushed her hand in his. *Giving her this*, I now knew.

Standing, I turned away from Seris and Cylrit only to almost step on Seth Milview, who was just beginning to stir. The airwaves vibrated between us as I sent out a pulse of sonic mana, and he jolted awake.

I held up a hand, forestalling any attempt he might make to speak. “Seth. The people here need help. Every able body. Many have fled into the wastes or toward the neighboring encampments. Some went into the forest. Round up who you can and bring them back to clear the village.”

His dilated eyes narrowed as he struggled to understand. I responded with a second pulse of vibration, and he yelped and jumped to his feet.

“This is important, Seth. Can you do it?”

Swallowing visibly, he nodded.

I reached out and fixed his glasses, which were hanging half off his face. “Good.”

My feet left the ground as mana lifted me into the air, and in seconds I too was speeding over the Beast Glades in a headlong rush toward the nearest teleportation gate, the Wraith’s words still ringing in my head.

“When Agrona gives the order, you will answer.”

24

CHANGES II

ARTHUR LEYWIN

As I led Sylvie and Caera back into the throne room for what felt like the tenth time over the last two days, I couldn't help the flash of annoyance that passed through me.

Edirith and two other young dragons were already there, but Charon and Windsom hadn't arrived yet. I could tell by Edirith's somewhat bored expression that their search had, yet again, been fruitless.

The other Wraiths, which, if Sylvie's vision had been correct, included at least the remains of two battle groups, had melted away entirely.

'It seems unlikely that they've simply given up and gone home,' Sylvie projected into my thoughts. *'They are certainly out there biding their time, even if we've delayed their attack against Charon and Etistin.'*

Charon had assigned three dragons to help search Etistin and the surrounding area. He hadn't actively hampered my work in any way, but he'd made precious little time for a joint strategic conference and outright refused to allocate more resources to the effort.

'It's almost like they want the Wraiths to attack,' Regis mused. *'Like they're baiting them out or something.'*

Sylvie shook her head as she scanned the faces of the other dragons with care. *‘No, I think they genuinely believe that the threat is minimal. That their very presence will prevent it. They aren’t stupid, they understand their orders and the danger presented, but they can’t accept that danger as real. A lifetime of roosting atop the very peak of power and authority in Epheotus has convinced them that they’ll be victorious no matter what happens.’*

“You’re all talking in your heads again, aren’t you?” Caera said, her voice low, as she paced at my side.

I blanched, giving her a guilty look. “Sorry, force of habit.”

Caera waved off the apology, her gaze drifting to the three dragons. “I imagine I’ll get used to it if you keep me around long enough.”

“I don’t want you to feel unwelcome,” I answered quickly. “I only keep asking if you’d like to return to the Alacryan camps because”—my eyes flicked to the dragons—“I know you haven’t had the best experience with them so far.”

Caera gave me a wry smile. “I’ve been sent here by Lady Seris as a representative, so putting my personal experience aside, I’ll stay to fulfill that duty.”

We slipped back into a strained quiet until Charon arrived a few minutes later, strolling into the throne room as casually as if he were out for a leisurely afternoon walk. Curtis Glayder kept pace at his side and gave me a familiar, although not particularly friendly, wave when he saw me waiting.

“Still no sign of any more Wraith activity,” Edirith confirmed to Charon promptly, snapping to attention. “With all due respect, Guardian, I think we’re wasting our time.”

Charon stopped and smiled, his hands clasped behind his back. He nodded as if he’d expected this news. “It seems your execution of their scout has ended this threat, Arthur. You’ve scoured half of Sapin by now. With the element of surprise no longer working in their benefit, I think it’s safe to say that the Wraiths have called off this attack.”

“We can’t know that, but…” I let out a breath, expelling some of my frustration with it, “perhaps you’re right.”

That, of course, was the problem with visions of the future. Elder Rinia had tried her best to drill the fact into my head that reacting to her visions, changing what they foretold, carried with it its own inherent dangers.

“Besides, the search has started to draw attention from the population,” Curtis chimed in. “People have noticed your presence, Arthur, and it is generating all sorts of worrying rumors after the explosion outside the city.”

I glanced at Curtis, remembering the vision. Watching the Glayders deaths had pushed me to act rashly, but I didn’t regret it. With no way to know when the attack was going to happen, delaying risked allowing that future to become a reality. On the other hand, lying in wait to spring some trap could have cost me days, even weeks, of valuable time. Once I’d actually discovered the Wraith scout, it was too late to do anything but give chase.

‘Don’t be too hard on yourself,’ Sylvie thought. *‘Hindsight may be perfect, but even visions can’t help us see all outcomes.’*

‘Ah, well, you know what they say: the soldier who never makes mistakes takes his orders from someone who does,’ Regis added.

I’m not sure how that’s applicable, I thought back.

Regis swirled around my core, his incorporeal form humming with amusement. *‘Nothing, really, I just wanted to feel included since we’re doling out little wisdoms, y’know?’*

I repressed the building sigh and turned my attention back to Charon.

“Now, Arthur, I had hoped we might have some time to speak privately. You’ve kept yourselves so busy, I’ve barely had any time at all to speak with my cousin.” Charon lifted a hand as I began to counter, stopping me. “I won’t withdraw the extra dragons I’ve brought to Etistin just yet, but I think the city can live without you and Sylvie for a few hours.”

In the end, all I could do was agree.

Edirith was sent back to his duties, and Curtis bade us all farewell as he hurried off to some other meeting.

Offering his arm to Sylvie, Charon led the way, effortlessly making meaningless chatter about the state of the city and the continent, what he thought of everything from the people to the food, and other such gossip.

The drawing room he led us to was unnecessarily opulent, clearly a holdover from a time before the war. The defensive structure of the city and palace was momentarily left behind as we entered the white and gold chamber, all smooth lines and extravagance. The furniture looked as if it had rarely been used, the plush rugs were as bright as if they'd been woven that very morning, and even though a large open fireplace burned merrily, there wasn't a smudge of dirt or ash on the white surfaces.

Windsom stood with his back to the fireplace, watching quietly as we entered. He had given up on attempting to force Sylvie's immediate return to Epheotus, but I was certain he had already reached out to his master for instructions. If Kezess decided to press the issue…

Well, I wasn't exactly sure what I would do yet.

I still hadn't gotten a read on Charon, who was either reasonable or just more patient and less obvious in his manipulation than Windsom. Not being certain made me more wary of the scarred dragon than of a blowhard like Vajrakor, and yet he made a potentially interesting ally.

If he is driven by something other than blind loyalty to Kezess, we could gain a lot by working alongside him, I thought, looking at his back.

Loyalty was already proving to be a difficult problem to navigate. In particular, Kathyln and Curtis Glayder occupied a worrying position. Specifically, I was uncomfortable with just how close they already seemed to Charon and his soldiers.

'Already?' Sylvie sent, responding to my thoughts. *'Remember, it's been months for them, and the dragons' powers of persuasion are far more potent than most humans can handle.'*

'They do seem problematically smitten,' Regis added in reference to the Glayders.

We'll see, I sent back.

“Lady Sylvie, I apologize that this Wraith situation has delayed our chance to converse properly,” Charon said as he closed the drawing room door behind us. “I’ve looked forward to an opportunity to meet you again since learning of your survival. You are looked at as a bit of an enigma among the clan…and that was before recent events.”

I let Sylvie take the lead in the conversation. I knew I had been pushing back too hard these past few days, trying to force equilibrium between myself and the dragons. Sylvie was better positioned to speak on equal footing, capitalizing on her relationship with Kezess, but only if I held myself in check. The link between our minds allowed us to speak as one when necessary, feeding off each other’s knowledge with each response.

“That was made pretty clear to me when Arthur and I trained in Epheotus,” Sylvie said lightly as she moved around the room and admired the decor. “Kezess insulated me from much of it to keep me focused on the training, but I didn’t miss the stares and whispers. A mixed lineage—dragon and basilisk—born outside of Epheotus and bonded with a human? I am an oddity that has never even been imagined in Epheotus, or so I was told.”

Charon’s smile was warm, if slightly chagrined. “True, though perhaps not exactly a polite way to phrase things. There were many among the clan that resented Lord Indrath’s tight grip on you. I think you would have found your clan quite receptive to your presence, had it been allowed. Still, in the end, it only enhanced your mystique.” He chuckled airily, then sobered. “When it was learned that you had…passed—well. It was quite a blow to the Indrath clan.”

I listened intently, absorbed in their conversation. I hadn’t really considered what the other dragons must have thought of Sylvie. She was my bond first and foremost. In my head, her mixed lineage and being granddaughter of the most powerful asura in Epheotus was always a distant afterthought.

“As you can see, the rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated,” Sylvie said, a note of humor in her tone despite her thoughts pulling away from considering what had happened after she sacrificed herself for me. “I do… appreciate what you’ve said, though. I’ve never given much thought to my relationship with the rest of the clan, if I’m being honest.” She leaned

against the back of a couch and shot me a look. “We’ve been pretty busy fighting a war.”

Charon cleared his throat. “Please, make yourselves comfortable. We have much to talk about, and there is no need to be so formal while doing so.” Leading by example, Charon moved to a high-backed chair with golden leaves embroidered up and down the arms.

Caera sat stiffly at the far end of the couch, away from Charon, and Sylvie moved around it to sit next to her, using her own body like a shield. I sensed Caera relax immediately, and had to appreciate my bond’s social grace.

Regis chose that moment to manifest, appearing from the soft shadows around my feet. He went to Caera and sat at her other side at the edge of the couch. Not being able to help himself, he turned and shot a glare at Windsom before settling in menacingly.

Windsom, who stayed by the fire, pretended not to notice.

Charon inspected Regis thoughtfully. “Sentient acclorite born of aether,” he mused. “The three of you are just as unique individually as in a group, aren’t you?”

“So, have you thought of proper contingencies regarding the Wraiths?” I asked, sitting on the edge of a plush chaise lounge. “Even if they’ve retreated from Etistin and called off their attack on you, they’re certainly still in Dicathen.” Considering my words carefully, I added, “Who knows how many. More than a single battle group, don’t you think?”

Charon seemed to mull over his answer before finally saying, “If the Wraiths attack me, or the other guardians, directly, I am confident we will be able to defend ourselves.” Seeing the apprehensive look on my face, he continued, “I understand that Agrona bills these Wraiths as his ‘asura-killers,’ and no doubt they are capable by lessuran standards. But I assure you, I am not the prey they were bred to hunt.”

“And the dragons out on patrol?” I asked, crossing my arms. “How many do you even have? It doesn’t seem like Kezess sent many of you. Are you willing to let your own people be picked off one by one?”

Charon nodded slightly as I spoke. “I do appreciate the danger there, and I will adjust the patrols to ensure my kin move in pairs. Should the need arise, they can retreat and call for additional reinforcements.” He cocked his head slightly. “Does that satisfy you?”

Caera leaned forward on her elbows, her ruby eyes intent on the dragon. “What about the people of this land? What’s to stop the Wraiths from launching hit-and-run strikes across Dicathen to sow discord and chaos? Or, lest we forget why we’re really here, attacking the Alacryans consigned to the wasteland beyond the mountains? Seris still needs the dragons’ aid to ensure the Alacryan encampments are defended.”

Charon’s brows rose, and a wry smile turned up the corner of his scarred mouth. “Spoken like a true Alacryan. And perhaps what you suggest is a possibility, although Agrona has never used his most potent tools for such menial labor before. As for civilian deaths…Lord Indrath’s orders are to prevent Agrona’s forces from destabilizing or destroying this continent. The emphasis of our protection remains on the largest, most influential cities, and the nobility that rules them. It was never part of his agreement that we would attempt to protect every single Dicathian life.”

“Oh, come on,” I said, leaning forward and twining my fingers together. “You have taken pains to involve yourself with the Dicathian public. All I asked was that Kezess help me protect this continent, and you could have done that from behind the scenes, but you’ve chosen to work directly with the people, building relationships and trust.” I paused for a moment, then took a risk. “You’re clearly pushing to turn public perception away from me and toward the dragons and your allies—such as the Glayders. If you allow Wraiths to roam freely and attack the continent, what will happen to the good will you’ve been trying to foster?”

This question gave him pause, and Charon didn’t answer right away, so Windsom stepped in on his behalf. “I have guided the people of Dicathen for generation after generation. Always, we have sought to ensure that they were on equal footing with Agrona’s people. That’s what we’re still trying to do.”

I looked over Caera and Sylvie to match gazes with Windsom. “You concentrated power in a few families that you could control and

handicapped our growth through the Lance artifacts. But then, you did so silently. This playing for public perception is new. What are you getting out of it? Surely it's more than the old stories of deities gaining power through the belief of their subjects," I added, my tone biting but amused.

"Nothing so crass," Charon interjected, giving me a tight-lipped smile. "But it is important that the Dicathians have hope. What good would it be for us to keep them safe if they themselves have succumbed to the bitter darkness of living without belief in their own future? As for your popularity…" His smile tightened yet further, looking almost pained. "Kezess rightly saw that split loyalty between you as this deified protector and my kin would potentially engender hostility between Dicathians. We have attempted to mute this by reinforcing the leadership of people like the Glayder siblings."

I nodded along, not buying a word of what Charon said. His excuse was as well-spoken and sensible as it was complete bullshit, but I felt no desire to fight him on the subject.

My motivations to grow stronger had never included the adoration of Dicathen's populace, and I'd actively pushed back against the "deification" that Charon mentioned.

"Regardless," Caera inserted into the brief moment of silence following Charon's speech, "your lord's strategy seems to rely on your mere presence being a deterrent, but what we've learned proves that strategy has already failed. We've been here for over two days, and you still haven't explained what you're going to do to help protect the Alacryan refugees in Elenoir."

Windsom scoffed, but Charon was more reserved in his response, saying only, "You are right." We waited for him to continue, but he didn't seem intent on adding anything.

Through the silence that followed, I felt multiple mana signatures moving purposefully toward the drawing room. Charon and Windsom had already noticed as well, and Windsom moved toward the door.

"In here?" a richly feminine voice said, pitchy with panic, and the drawing room door flew inward.

Lyra Dreide regarded me with red-rimmed eyes, her shoulders rising and falling with each barely controlled breath. She took a couple of halting steps into the chamber, her feet dragging across the marble. She was clearly exhausted, her mana signature weak.

I pushed myself out of my seat. “What happened?”

She opened her mouth to speak but the words caught in her throat and she looked away.

Kathyln was standing uncertainly in the hall behind her. “She flew in, claiming it was urgent—”

“We are in a *meeting*,” Windsom scoffed, glaring at Kathyln, who shrank back. “Why have you allowed this Vritra pawn so deep within the palace?”

“Peace,” Charon said softly. “There has been an attack, hasn’t there?” His gaze flicked to me just as mine went to him, our eyes connecting for the briefest instant.

“The Wraiths…” I said, the words almost a groan as they escaped my lips.

Lyra shook her head, then nodded. Her eyes squeezed tightly shut, her teeth bared in an animalistic snarl. Words strained through those clenched teeth as she said, “Oludari *and* the Wraiths…”

I felt my brows pinch together in confusion. “Olu…dari?”

“One of Agrona’s Sovereigns,” Caera said. Her face was pale, her red eyes locked on Lyra as she half stood, then slowly sank back down onto the couch, her hands going to her face.

“There was a *Sovereign* here in Dicathen?” I felt out of sorts, like I was missing some important context of this conversation. “Lyra, I need you to focus. Tell me what happened. Please,” I added more softly.

Charon moved to a low shelf along one wall where a few bottles and glasses rested. He poured a glass full of red liquid and held it out for Lyra.

It took her a moment to notice, but when she did her nose wrinkled in apparent disgust. Her hand flinched toward the glass, and for a moment I

thought she was going to knock it out of Charon's hand, but she seemed to realize what she was doing and pulled back again.

Swallowing heavily, she looked past the dragon and focused on me. "I apologize, Regent. This wasn't how…it hasn't been…"

She took a deep breath and stood up straighter. Charon slowly lowered the glass and took a step back to give her some space.

"Sovereign Oludari of Truacia arrived at one of the encampments, desperate for protection. He seemed to believe…his begging was difficult to make sense of, but he was terrified of Agrona, implied that the High Sovereign was behind the death of Sovereign Exeges and would be coming for him as well."

My confusion only deepened as she spoke. "Why would Agrona be killing off his own allies? Especially his most powerful ones?" I looked at Charon and Windsom for support.

The two dragons exchanged an unreadable look, some hidden thought passing between them. "I can't be certain," Charon said after a moment, "but the basilisks have never been loyal. Not to themselves or the other asura."

"He was babbling, said something about…about his work being unfinished." Lyra's brows knitted as she concentrated. "He said there were 'layers to the world,' and that he had 'felt the rising surface tension of a bubble ready to burst—'"

"The ravings of a paranoid lunatic," Windsom said, waving away Lyra's words. "It offers no hint of why Agrona might be hunting him. Perhaps he was mistaken? If he is the last of the Sovereigns, seeing the others fall one by one likely drove him to desperate madness."

Some small fact that I had read long ago jumped to the forefront of my mind. "The last? Aren't there five, and then the High Sovereign himself?"

It was Caera who answered. "Sovereign Khaernos hasn't been seen publicly in decades. He's sometimes impolitely referred to as the Invisible Sovereign…"

“We believe he is dead,” Windsom said indifferently. “Perhaps he was the first victim of Agrona’s fratricide. I don’t know or particularly care.”

The chamber went silent for a moment, and then Lyra continued her story, her voice tight with suppressed emotion. “The Wraiths were not far behind Oludari. Four of them. They fought…the village, destroyed…so many people dead.” Lyra’s gaze, which had drifted to the floor, snapped up and burrowed into me, desperation written in the lines of her face. “You, Arthur. They blamed you. Said that…”

“They were there because I diverted the attack on Etistin,” I finished for her.

She nodded. Finally, she moved, half stumbling toward the nearest chair before slumping into it, her face in her hands. “They defeated him, took him away. And they gave Seris a warning.”

Charon’s expression intensified. “What warning?”

“That—” Lyra ground her teeth together, cutting herself off. Glancing from me to Charon, she licked her lips and started again. “That this wasn’t over. They left us alive because…Agrona wanted to kill us himself.”

My eyes narrowed as I regarded her. She was lying, I was almost certain of it, but not to me. *She doesn’t want the dragons to know what the Wraiths really said.*

‘Which likely means it is something that would endanger their continued protection,’ Sylvie added.

‘For all the good that protection seems to be doing for them,’ Regis chimed in.

“There is more,” Lyra continued, withdrawing something from her dimension device. She held it out to me. “Seris told me to bring it to you immediately.”

I carefully lifted a small disc from her hand. Judging by the silky texture and the off-white coloration, it was carved of bone. A blood-stained rune had been etched into its surface, and it emanated a potent mana signature.

Focusing on the mana, I probed it with my aether. Immediately, another source of mana resonated with it from a long way away, ringing like a distant bell. *Oludari…*

‘It’s carved from his bone,’ Regis informed me, sniffing the disc in my hand.

“Did Seris know what this artifact is?” I asked Lyra. She nodded.

I ran the pad of my thumb across the smooth surface, tracing the ridges where the rune was etched.

Caera, who had waited and watched, still as stone as she listened to the retainer’s explanation, took a shaky breath. “Is my blood alive?”

Lyra looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. “I don’t know.”

“Arthur, we need to return to the Alacryan villages. I…” She paused as if considering her words, almost looking surprised at her own thoughts. “I need to make sure Corbett, Lenora, and the others are safe.”

“Give Lyra a moment to rest, and she will take you.”

Caera gave me a strange, crestfallen look but quickly covered it up. “Of course.”

To Charon, I said, “Those Alacryans need help. I understand your hesitation, but an attack is no longer some hypothetical situation we’re discussing. They laid down their arms, made homes on Dicathian soil, and risked Agrona’s wrath.”

Charon eyed me uncertainly.

“Are you worried about the danger they pose?” I asked more forcefully. “Then consider just how much more dangerous they become if they’re forced to turn back to Agrona because we abandoned them on our own shores.”

Charon’s eyes hardened, and through the scars I suddenly saw his resemblance to Kezess. “Alternatively, what would happen if we proactively eradicated the potential risk that these refugees pose and be done with it.”

Caera’s and Lyra’s heads both snapped around, their faces going pale.

“General Aldir followed Kezess’s orders to shed innocent blood as well,” I said, speaking slowly and letting the words hang in the air.

“How dare you…” Windsom’s intent flared, knocking the wind out of Caera and Lyra.

Regis and Sylvie remained deathly still and calm, their outward demeanor unaffected.

Charon gestured Windsom for calm, then sighed and nodded. “I will send two dragons and adjust the patrol routes through the Beast Glades. But we will be watching these ‘refugees’ just as much as we are protecting them.”

I held out my hand, and he took it firmly. “Order your dragons to ensure that Lyra Dreide and Caera get there safely as well, would you?” In my head, I continued, sending instructions to Sylvie as well.

Charon nodded again then released my grip. “And what exactly will you be doing, Arthur?”

Turning toward the door, I again pinged the artifact, gauging the location of the distant ringing response. “It’s what *we* will be doing, Guardian.”

25

AMONGST THE FALLEN

LILIA HELSTEA

My legs burned as I crested the long incline of the switchback mountain trail. Hands on my hips, I turned to admire the wagon train stretching down the mountainside behind me.

Jarrod Redner, who had been walking at my side, put his hands on his knees and gasped for air. “I don’t…understand…why we’re…taking this old… mountain path,” he said breathlessly.

Although I knew he was speaking rhetorically, I answered anyway. “There isn’t anywhere for these people to go in northern Sapin. Valden, Marlow, Elkshire—they can’t support them. The farming villages between Xyrus and Blackbend, though, have room. And there aren’t any roads through the dense, marshy forest between Marlow City and Xyrus.”

“I…know…” he puffed, standing up straight and screwing up his face as he tried to control his breathing.

A few of the adventurers acting as guards passed us, and then the first cart. A little girl stared forlornly off the edge of the mountain path as her grandfather controlled the reins of two large skitters that were pulling their small cart. Her parents had died fighting at the Wall.

“Hello, Kacheri,” I said, giving her a small wave.

When she didn’t wave back, I slipped something out of my bag and tossed it at her. She watched it sail through the air and land on the seat next to her with a vacant expression, then jumped with excitement and hurried to remove the wax paper.

Her eyes widened, sparkling with excitement as she shoved the chewy caramel in her mouth.

“Poor kid,” Jarrod said under his breath as the cart rolled past.

There were over two hundred people in our caravan, people like Kacheri who had lost almost everything, and the only hope they had was to escape the smaller villages like Ashber because they could no longer sustain themselves after the war. Families had been ripped apart, people enslaved, their properties taken from them or destroyed, and when the war ended so suddenly, Sapin had lacked the leadership and infrastructure to send help or rebuild.

With countless mothers, daughters, sons, and fathers never returning from the war, too many families just couldn’t survive so far away from the cities.

Ironically, a few of those in the caravan were people we had helped escape the cities to begin with who hadn’t been able to risk making the return journey on their own and had instead waited months for assistance. Some of them would return to Xyrus and Blackbend, but others had no homes, families, or lives to return to. With no hope of their own, they needed someone to step in and help rekindle it for them.

Nudging a small rock with my toe, I watched as it bounced down the steep mountain, the repeated *clack*, *clack* of stone against stone quiet under the continuous crunch of wagon wheels and the rumble of so many voices, both human and mana beast.

Jarrod was silent but kept up a brave face for the sake of those who rolled past.

Ahead, I heard the guards calling out and turned my ear in their direction.

“Just announcing a rest,” Jarrod said, seeing my worried look. “It’ll take a while to get everyone up this incline, so we can take a breather ourselves, right?”

I nodded, hiking my pack higher up on my back and continuing up the road, which leveled out as it curved around a broad valley in the mountainside. “At least half an hour to get the last carts up here, but we should all fit comfortably on this flat space.

Jarrod cut through a gap between a cart and the family following it on foot, then beelined for a large boulder that had fallen from the mountain and cracked in half at the road’s edge. By the placement, it looked like someone had moved it with magic a long time ago, and now it made a convenient table for Jarrod to pull out a few containers of food.

I followed, comfortable with the ritual by now. Withdrawing a few things from my own dimension artifact, I laid them out to share, then took up an apple and bit into it with a crunch.

A heavy-set woman in bright-colored clothes whistled as she passed us by in her small chariot, which was being pulled by a large bird almost as bright as its owner. “Oi, when are you going to ask *me* for a lunch date, Jarrod Redner?”

Jarrod’s cheeks flushed, and his mouth worked silently as he struggled for a reply.

“Maybe the day your very presence doesn’t redden his face and steal his tongue, Rose-Ellen,” I shot back, then laughed behind my hand.

“Alas then,” she shouted, turning around in her chariot and straightening her tight blouse, “I fear I am doomed to hear only the sound of silence from those wind-kissed lips of his.” She gave me a wicked grin. “Unlike you, Lady Helstea.”

I waved my hand to shush her, then hid my smile behind my apple, slowly taking a bite.

Jarrod took his time ripping a strip of dried meat off a slab and nibbling little bites off it, looking everywhere but at me. After a minute, he cleared his throat and said, “Do you ever think about…before? Like, Xyrus

Academy, and what life might have been like if the Alacryans hadn't attacked?"

"Sure," I answered, absently turning the apple over in my hands. "It's hard not to, even when I know it doesn't help anything." I hesitated, then met Jarrod's eye. "What's on your mind?"

"I just…" He paused and took a bite, chewing slowly. "Everything that's happened since the attack on the academy has been…awful, you know? But…" He shifted in his seat, his eyes darting around as he searched for the words, and I realized he looked…guilty. "I don't want to sound like I'm discounting the horror that these people have faced—that everyone in Dicathen has faced, like the elves, like that girl, but…"

He let out a dramatic sigh and finally looked at me. "I just wanted to say, I like this. I…like what we're doing. Helping these people? Spending time… uh, making a real difference, I guess. If it weren't for the war—if you hadn't saved my life when I literally tried to *kill you*, I just don't know who I'd have become. Is it…bad, I guess, that I prefer who I am now?"

I felt tears building behind my eyes and quickly blinked them away. "No, I don't think that's bad." I cleared my throat but wasn't sure what else to say.

Sensing the awkwardness, Jarrod chuckled wryly. "Speaking of saving my life, I think that's Tanner cresting the ridge over there, see? Who'd have guessed I'd end up working alongside that blade wing rider again, huh? I swear I still have nightmares about Velkor…"

I snickered into my hand. "You should show some more appreciation for the mana beast that helped you escape Xyrus."

"Easy for you to say," Jarrod exclaimed, brandishing his jerky at me. "You didn't have to ride the beast. I swear, I'm still not sure Tanner even knew how to control it, really."

"Well, he seems to have a good enough handle on it now—" A gasp burst out of me unbidden, and I jumped to my feet as my entire body went cold with horror.

The blade wing was twisting wildly, its flight quick and erratic as it tried and failed to avoid the green jet of light that lanced across the sky and

struck it from behind. Velkor and Tanner spun out of control, and the blade wing's distant silhouette vanished from sight as it plummeted out of the sky.

Four dark figures, at first only specks, grew quickly larger as they approached, their killing intent expanding before them like a wave of black, crushing mana.

"Guards!" I screamed, breaking into a sprint toward the front of the caravan. Jarrod didn't hesitate but followed right behind me, wind wrapping around his arms and legs.

The adventurers had already begun to form ranks, some conjuring shields around the refugees, others chanting and preparing offensive spells to launch a counterattack at whatever approached.

But we could all sense the strength of their unconcealed mana signatures, and already I saw the hopeless looks being exchanged between our guards and heard the quavering of their voices.

Shouts went down the wagon train, bringing the carts to a halt one after another. Most of the people we were escorting weren't mages, and they couldn't sense what was approaching, nor had they seen Tanner shot from the air, but they saw the defensive spells being cast, and that was enough to send them into a panic.

There wasn't time to organize, though. We couldn't turn around, run, or hide. The distance from the road to the ridge where the blade wing had first appeared melted away as the figures bore down on us in what felt like seconds.

Diane Whitehall, one of the adventurers who was leading the protection of our caravan, chopped downward with her arm and shouted, "Attack!"

I held my breath as a volley of spells launched into the air.

Not a single one found its target.

Black ice crystalized around the feet of our frontline defenders. The ice condensed into spikes and thrust upward, piercing mana, armor, and then flesh and bone with casual effortlessness.

I heard chainmail rip and bones break. Men and women screamed, then went silent as their familiar physical forms became a shredded red mess staining the black ice.

Behind them, the second line stumbled back, defensive spells flickering out, no barrage of return fire evident as the horror of the display stole the strength from even these hardened warriors.

“Fall back!” Diane ordered, her commanding tone replaced by a manic shriek, but there was nowhere for any of us to go.

Green mist billowed up from what remained of the corpses, engulfing the survivors. I couldn’t turn away as their flesh began to run like candle wax down their bodies, their dying screams bubbling with bile and blood. Diane’s freckled face and curly hair sloughed off to reveal the skull beneath, then she collapsed.

The skitters pulling the lead cart scrambled over each other to get away, ripping out of their harnesses and clawing over the driver’s seat, ripping Kacheri’s grandfather to pieces. Then the mist hit the cart, and I finally turned away, unable to watch what followed, unable to even feel my core past the sickening numbness that was gripping my mind and body.

Suddenly Jarrod had a hold of me, dragging me away from the mist as it devoured the second and third carts in line as well. Everything was screaming…the mountain was tipping on itself, turning upside down as if trying to throw us off into the sky…

I fell to my knees and was sick in the dirt.

I’d been in the war, in my own way. I’d fought, I’d killed…but I’d never seen such casual and horrific death. Even in the worst days of the Alacryan occupation of Xyrus, I hadn’t experienced anything like this.

“Cast another spell and die,” one of the figures said, a woman by her voice.

Trembling, I watched as she landed amid the carnage of their attack, the mist dissolving around her. She had jet black hair and red eyes…and horns.

A Vritra, I thought, a word that only partially had meaning until that moment.

“Bear a weapon and die,” she continued, stepping toward the handful of adventurers still drawing breath. “Run and die. Irritate me…and die.” She paused, standing over me, her crimson-colored gaze sweeping across the front of the caravan. I could hear her voice carrying down the mountainside, echoing so she could be heard even from the far end a half mile distant. “Who speaks for you?”

“I—I do,” I said weakly, although it wasn’t true, strictly speaking. “S-sort of, I guess.” Struggling, I wiped my sick-splashed hands in the dirt and stood. “This isn’t a…we’re just helping people move to surviving towns, that’s all. We aren’t transporting anything of value…except human lives.”

The woman smiled, a cruel expression on her blunt face. “Convenient, because that is exactly what we need right now.” Over her shoulder, she said, “Raest, head to the rear of the caravan. Ensure no one gets brave.”

Raest was badly burned and missing most of one arm, but he gave no outward sign of pain as he nodded in understanding and flew off down the road.

“Varg, give the venerable Sovereign over to Renczi and assist me in the preparations,” she continued, her piercing eyes flicking toward the sky.

A second man landed beside her. He had a narrow, sharp face with a long, curved chin, and short horns stabbed up from each temple above his small eyes. Over his shoulder, he was carrying a prone form. He stepped up close to the woman and spoke in a low tone that I could only barely make out. “You sure this is the best idea, Perhata? We could—”

She bared her teeth at him, shutting him up. “For the moment, we have the Sovereign but no tempus warp, since ours went up with Cethin and you so foolishly destroyed the Scythe’s. We need to send out a signal, and these Dicathian unads give us cover in case we have…company.”

Her focus turned to me, sharpening. “Your pulse quickens at my words, as if they mean hope for you.” She bared elongated canines and leaned in close. “Know that if you survive this, it will be because you did exactly as I said. It will be because *I* spared you. Seek no hope from outside yourself, understand?”

Swallowing past a lump in my throat, I nodded. When she extended a hand toward my face, I flinched away, but she was faster, and her fingers clamped around my cheeks. “Go, child. Calm your people. Explain what is needed of them. Ensure that they understand their continued existence is firmly in their own hands.”

She gave me a soft shove as she released me, and I nearly tumbled over backward.

Jarrod took hold of my arm to steady me. “Lilia, are you…” He trailed off, then used his sleeve to wipe away a spot of vomit clinging to my lips, whispering, “What are we going to do?”

“What she says,” I confirmed. “Come on, let’s keep these poor people from stampeding off the mountainside.”

Despite my confident words to Jarrod, as we began making our way down the length of our caravan, speaking to family after family, I couldn’t help but feel fraudulent in my attempts to spread calm. After all, hadn’t I just stood frozen as a mere child was casually executed by their cruelty? And now here I was jumping to do the woman, Perhata’s, bidding…

It was perhaps a benefit that the four powerful mages were flying around and casting spells, their punishing auras like the weight of an oncoming thunderstorm, because most of the people in our care were too frightened to do anything except exactly what they were told. *Just like me.*

“Just stay with your family, and keep calm,” I told a middle-aged man whose six children were whimpering from inside their wagon. The four aurochs pulling the large vehicle shifted nervously, but he kept them firmly in hand. “I’m confident that when they get what they want, they’ll leave us be.”

I smiled and hated myself for it. Was I lying to the man? I had no way of knowing, and that broke my heart.

As I stepped away from his wagon, which was perhaps halfway along the line of carts, wagons, and people on foot as they snaked up the mountainside, the ground rumbled and quaked beneath my feet.

Stone exploded somewhere deep beneath us.

I gasped as my ankle turned on a rock, and the four aurochs surged forward toward the back of the small cart ahead of them. The father shouted in panic, jerking futilely at the reins as his children screamed from behind the thick cloth covering their wagon. The lead aurochs dipped their heads and slammed into the back of the cart, splintering wood and sending it careening toward the road's edge.

The lone woman on the cart screeched in surprise and terror, and her skitters hissed and tried to surge up the mountainside, dragging the broken cart behind them.

The hissing lizards spooked the aurochs even more, and the beasts swerved right to get around the smaller cart, taking them—and the family they were pulling—toward the edge of the road and the sharp incline down the face of the mountain.

Reaching outward, I took hold of the limited water-attribute mana in the atmosphere and condensed it into a wall just before the aurochs plunged over the side. The beasts smashed into the wall and were forced straight, keeping them on the road as they raced along its very edge, the wagon rebounding off the wall of water behind them.

Thrusting both hands forward, I sent the wall as a wave across the ground beneath the wagon, pushing it into the dirt and gravel, softening it into a thick muck to catch the wheels.

The wagon slid side to side as the aurochs tried to force their way around the next cart in line. I conjured another wall at their side, preventing them from veering too far right and plunging down the fatal incline, but it was clear what was going to happen if the runaway beasts turned our caravan into a full-blown stampede.

Gathering as much force as I could behind the wall of water, I condensed it into a scythe and dropped the liquid blade across the harness connecting the

beasts to the wagon. Wood and leather splintered, and the aurochs bellowed in terror, leaping from the road. For a moment, they held their formation, sprinting in unison down the steep mountainside, then one lost its footing.

I looked away, unable to stomach the sight that followed.

The wagon rested half off the road, the screaming of breathless, terrified children still issuing from its interior. With its wheels stuck in thick mud, it was stable for the moment, but I wasted no time rushing to the wagon's rear and ripping open the cloth covering. Six pale faces stared out at me even as their father struggled to get to them from the other side.

"Come on, out, out!" I urged, waving them toward me.

Two older girls grabbed their two youngest siblings in their arms and hurried toward me. The other two scrambled to escape out the front, their father dragging them through the opening. As the weight shifted, the wagon slid sideways in the muck.

I grabbed the first two children and pulled them to safety. As I reached for the second pair, the wagon slid again, and the older child yelled and slipped as the wooden floor lurched beneath her.

A gust of wind slammed into the wagon's broad side, pushing it back toward me. The girl lunged, and I grabbed her and heaved, yanking her off the deck and onto solid ground.

Jarrod ran up, channeling the gust of wind and slowly pushing the wagon back onto the road.

Above us, the two skitters clung to the mountainside, a half-destroyed cart dangling beneath them. The driver was lying in the dirt a dozen feet away, nursing a badly bruised elbow and cursing her mana beasts.

A deadly aura approached, and I looked up to see the one-armed Vritra, Raest, land in our midst. He slowly gazed around, his eyes narrow and hostile. "Keep your folk in line, girl."

My anger and anxiety overcame me, and I stepped in front of the cowering family and leveled a fierce glare at him. "Whatever you're doing feels like

it’s going to bring down the mountain with us on it! Your spells scared some of the mana beasts, and these people almost—”

I choked on my words as his killing intent wrapped around my throat like a clawed fist. Eyes bulging, I scratched at my neck but couldn’t force in a breath.

The Alacryan stepped closer. “Do not think that our need for you is so great that it makes us willing to be disrespected, worm. Perhaps the rest of this pathetic lot will be more pliant if I spread your guts from one end of the caravan to the other?”

“Please, that’s enough!” Jarrod yelled, running to my side. “We understand, all right?”

Raest eyed Jarrod with disdain, then flew up into the air and away, his aura receding with him.

I sank to my knees, tears streaming down my cheeks, and dragged in a rasping breath. “Stupid…” I gasped, shaking my head and angrily wiping my tears away.

“So I’ve been told,” Jarrod said, kneeling beside me.

I wheezed uncomfortably, half laughing, half crying. “Not you. I shouldn’t have—”

“Never mind that,” he asserted, offering me his hand. When I took it, he helped me stand. “Come on. There are a lot of people here looking to us for some kind of leadership.”

Knowing he was right, I stood straight and did my best to collect myself. We helped the woman release her skitters. Several other families came forward to find places for the large family to take shelter and redistribute the goods contained in their now-useless wagon.

Assuming we ever leave this mountainside, I caught myself thinking. *But then, perhaps it means they still have some hope. Otherwise, why bother?*

Feeling a little better, Jarrod and I continued along the wagon train, doing our best to explain what was happening and offer consolation and guidance

where it was needed.

It took nearly two hours to reach the end of the caravan, where the one-armed mage was watching over the road to ensure no one tried to turn and flee. Meanwhile, the mountain continued to tremble like a volcano about to erupt, and our captors offered us no further explanation.

A bitter wind had started to blow down the mountainside, turning the air cold, and most of the people had retreated to covered wagons to huddle around warming artifacts or built fires and set up tents against the base of the cliff that bordered the road. With my cloak pulled tight around my shoulders, I turned away from the last cart in our caravan and began making my way back up the mountain with Jarrod.

“Do you feel that?” he asked, stopping and looking westward, using his hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

“Impossible…” I breathed, the word little more than a groan.

Mana signatures, just as powerful as those of the Alacryan mages who had taken us prisoner, were approaching rapidly. Within moments, I could make out a cluster of five shapes speeding through the air toward us.

Perhata and Varg rose to meet them. The five new arrivals were all horned and red-eyed, just like Perhata and her companions, and each one felt at least as strong as a white core mage…

Nine such powers, I thought in dismay. *How is such a thing even possible?*

“Maybe they’ll let us go now,” Jarrod said hopefully. “If they get what they want, there is no reason for them to harm us, right?”

I couldn’t bring myself to agree with him, my mind lingering on the quakes that had been shaking the mountain for the last couple of hours.

“Maybe I can make out what they’re saying…” Jarrod murmured, casting a spell.

A light breeze seemed to turn against the cold wind coming down from the east, blowing only around Jarrod.

“They…Wraiths, I think that’s what they’re called. What are Wraiths? That man they captured, he’s a Sovereign, whatever that means. They’re waiting for one of their teleportation devices, but these new arrivals—they’re responding to some kind of signal Perhata sent—they don’t have one. They’re arguing now, and—oh, oh no. Shit…”

There was a wet whisper, and bright blood bloomed like an opening flower across Jarrod’s chest. He looked at me in surprise and confusion, his mouth opening and closing, then he sank to the ground. Somewhere, a scream sounded like a distant alarm, made muddy by the pounding of my own pulse in my ears.

“J-Jarrod…?”

I fell to his side, pressing my hands to his chest. There was a small tear in his shirt, and beneath it a clean hole in his flesh. Blood was pooling underneath him.

His hand reached for my cheek, smearing blood across my face, then slowly fell back to his side. A pained moan escaped his lips, and then he was still, the light fading from his eyes.

All I could do was stare in horror at my friend’s body.

With painstaking slowness, my head turned to where the Wraiths flew above us. They weren’t even looking…

People were moving around me, coming to see only to halt and step back as they realized Jarrod was already dead, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the Wraiths as they flew away, landing near the head of our wagon train.

Only then did my tear-filled eyes turn back to Jarrod.

He stared blindly up at me. Shaking, I pushed his lids closed. I suddenly realized that, although I was surrounded by people, I was completely alone. I’d known some of the adventurers who were guarding us, but they weren’t my friends, and most of them had died in the initial attack. The people we were helping relocate were nearly all strangers to me, at best people I had found and helped escape from Xyrus. Father and Mother were a long way away. Vanesy had helped organize this journey, but there had been no need for her to attend personally.

I was all on my own, and I had no idea what to do next.

My stomach twisted as a Wraith mana signature approached, their intent lashing at me like a whip. The one-armed Wraith was drifting in our direction yet again. There was an awful smirk carved across his burned face. “Perhata said it, didn’t she? Cast a spell, die. Fools. All you need to do is sit still, shut up, and stay out of our way.”

I had no strength to exchange words with this fiend out of my worst nightmares, but he wasn’t listening anyway. His head jerked up, his grotesque, blistered nose sniffing at the air like a beast. A low growl emanated from his throat, and he glared balefully down at me. “Silence. Say nothing, on pain of death.”

Then, one by one, I felt the Wraiths’ presence vanishing. Even as I stared at Raest, I lost all perception of his stifling mana signature. In the space of a few breaths, it was like the Wraiths had disappeared.

Blindly, my hand groped until it closed around Jarrod’s already cooling arm. *What the hell is going on?*

A distant but swiftly approaching emanation answered my question even as I thought it.

Spinning where I knelt by Jarrod’s body, I stared without comprehension into the sky. Three massive, winged shapes had appeared over the mountains and were flying directly toward us.

Dragons! *Three* dragons!

Breathless, I hungrily absorbed the sight of them: two beautiful crystalline-white beings with ice-blue webbing in their wings and gleaming spikes along their backs, led by a third, black as midnight and seething with a killing intent unlike any I’d felt before.

I considered Raest from the corner of my eye as the dragons slowed, wheeling around to the west and investigating our caravan. He wasn’t watching me, but had hunkered down beside a cart, his bloodshot eyes locked on the dragons.

No, I thought, suddenly desperate, my fingers going white around Jarrod's dead flesh. *They'll think we're just…us, they won't know the Wraiths are here, they'll leave!*

I swallowed heavily, steeling myself for what I needed to do. The Wraith would kill me, I saw that as clearly as I did the dragons in the sky, but I'd been dead since the moment the Wraiths shot down Tanner and his blade wing…

Taking a deep breath, I prepared to cast a spell.

26

AMONGST THE FALLEN II

MY HEART FLUTTERED inside my chest, hardly daring to beat as I reached for the mana necessary to cast a spell. It didn't have to be complicated, or even strong. A jet of water, condensed to burst like a firework—just enough to get the dragons' attention. If they flew away…

Even though I couldn't feel his manifested intent, I knew the monster named Raest was barely a dozen feet away. *He'll sense what I'm doing,* I thought hopelessly. There was no way I could hide the spell from someone as powerful as him. Even if I suppressed my mana, he would see right through me. Despite his missing arm and cracked skin, he could cross the distance and break my neck without revealing even a blip of his mana.

Although I wasn't looking at it, I could feel Jarrod's lifeless body next to me, and I knew it didn't matter if Raest managed to reach me. Not if I could fire off the spell first—

I jumped with fright as the air crackled with power, and a voice like thunder boomed across the mountainside. "Agents of Agrona," the voice said, resounding as if projected by every inch of bare stone. "We know you're here, so-called Wraiths, and that you have the Sovereign, Oludari of the Vritra clan. Guardian Charon Indrath is offering you this one opportunity to turn yourselves over to our authority and release your prisoner to us."

The black dragon swept low, flying past our caravan of wagons beside the road, its bright yellow eyes scouring us in search of the hidden Wraiths. The wind of its passage made my hair fly back, and its aura at such a close range stole my breath. The spell I'd been stealthily attempting to form died on my fingertips.

Awe and relief overwhelmed me. I leaned against Jarrod's body, still clutching his arm with one hand, and wept silently.

"Consider yourself fortunate, dragon," the harsh, bittersweet voice of Perhata answered. Her words were disembodied, emanating from everywhere and nowhere at once, giving no clue of her physical location. "We aren't here for you, not today. But that won't stop us from delivering your wings to Agrona if you interfere."

The black dragon wheeled high above, reconvening with the two white dragons, their wings beating slowly to keep their enormous bodies in the air. "Don't be absurd," it said, its tone thick with disbelief. "Your flight is over, your incursion into Dicathen failed. You can no longer run, nor can you hide from us. You insult yourselves by not accepting reality."

Someone farther up the caravan cheered, exalting in the dragons' presence. Several people quickly joined them, and my relief took on a tinge of fear. *Be quiet,* I pleaded, not wanting them to draw attention to themselves.

Perhata's disembodied laughter echoed across the mountainside, drowning out all other noise. "You have yet to mention that we hold not one hostage, but a couple hundred, yes? I have been trained since birth to kill your kind, asura, but know that in the process of fighting this losing battle, you would be condemning all these people—the very people you claim to protect—to a grisly death. You know as well as I that, if this mountain becomes a battlefield, you cannot save them, not even from your own powers."

I swallowed hard, my swollen eyes instinctively tracking across the nearby wagons and carts, and the faces of those who rode in them.

The dragon was silent for only a beat before answering. "You are cowards. Claim to be our equals all you wish, but the fact that you hide behind magicless lessers to save yourselves tells us everything we need to know." It twisted its long neck, giving the other two dragons a meaningful look.

As if reacting to a command, they both descended, transforming as they did so. The gleaming white scales melded together and formed shining plate armor, the reptilian features flattening and becoming humanoid. By the time their feet touched the ground, both dragons wore the forms of severe but beautiful women, long blond hair streaming down their backs from beneath scaled helmets. Each bore an identical tower shield and longspear.

“See how heartless your saviors are?” Perhata’s voice oozed from the air. “We were prepared to let you live, only desiring the return of one of our own. But these asuras, they think of you only as a flock of wogarts to be tended and maintained. If a few here and there need to be slaughtered for the good of the herd, though, they won’t hesitate. You all should have bowed to High Sovereign Agrona when you had the chance.”

The two asuran women landed on a flat outcropping above the caravan. They remained there only a moment, searching the wagons below, before one of them leapt off, carving a graceful arc through the air and landing light as a feather near the end of the train, only a few wagons down from where I knelt—and the Wraith, Raest, hid.

“Although unlikely, if any of you manage to survive this, tell your kin,” Perhata continued, her words an intrusion I couldn’t block out or escape. “Share with everyone you encounter the cruelty of the Indrath clan and the kindness of the Vritra.”

Lying, manipulative witch, I thought bitterly, but at the same time, I knew she was right about the dragons’ willingness to sacrifice us. Squeezing my eyes shut tight, I pressed outward against my despair until my ears rang and my face burned red. *These refugees—most women and children—need me to have hope, to care if they live or die. Because I might be the only one here who does.*

My mind went inexplicably to Kacheri, the little girl who vanished in an instant of spellfire, collateral damage as the Wraiths exterminated our mages and guards.

I couldn’t save her. And I knew I wouldn’t be able to save everyone now cowering in fear on this mountainside, either. My gaze was dragged down

to Jarrod. My fingers slid off his strangely still flesh, then curled into white-knuckled fists. *One. Just help one person. That's all it takes.*

The asuran woman was approaching, walking along the inside of the carts as she searched them one by one. The men, women, and children occupying them seemed frozen and slightly unreal, like the blurry figures in the background of a painting. Their eyes followed along with the asura's progress, but they otherwise remained unnervingly still.

Raest was ever so slowly shifting around the cart as the asura approached. Even though I knew he was there and could see him with my own eyes, my attention wanted to slip off him, to look anywhere else.

My breath caught as the Wraith and the asura maneuvered to opposite sides of the same cart, Raest's steps falling in time with the dragon's to hide even the whisper-quiet sound of his slow shifting. Everything seemed to be happening so slowly. *Where are the other Wraiths? The second dragon? What are they waiting for—*

Suddenly the longspear was carving downward, leaving a blurred silver crescent in its wake.

The weapon shattered the heavy cart, sending shards of broken wood and personal belongings flying in every direction. At the front of the cart, a man and woman were propelled off as if they'd been fired from a catapult, so sudden and violent they didn't even have a chance to scream.

On the other side of the cart, Raest threw himself to the side, so fast I could hardly see his movements, and still that wasn't fast enough. The longspear sliced down the side of his leg with a spray of blood even as he breathed out a cloud of noxious green poison.

Conjuring an orb of water, I caught the pair of farmers who had been tossed from the wagon, but there was nothing I could do as their two aurochs were inundated by the cloud, which dissolved both the long shaggy fur and the flesh beneath, so that their pockmarked bones splashed into the muck beneath them.

Silver light radiated out of the dragon's shield, wrapping her in a moving barrier that repulsed the fog, but the cloud was spreading quickly.

“Run!” I screamed even as I scrambled back from the expanding mist.

In a moment of hesitation, I reached for Jarrod’s arm, wildly thinking I could save his body for a proper burial.

That moment of hesitation nearly cost me my life.

As I slowed and my hand reached out, the fog caught up with me, oozing around my fingers. I was already moving again, hurling myself away, before I registered the pain. The skin of my right hand cracked and blistered in an instant, entire patches sloughing away like shed snakeskin as it melted.

Biting back a scream, I cradled the wounded limb to my stomach and sprinted away, lacking even the chance to honor Jarrod’s sacrifice by watching as the flesh-decaying fumes consumed him.

The two farmers and I bolted past the next wagon in line just as the large feline mana beasts pulling it lunged away from the noise and flaring mana, screeching as they jumped off the road and tried to sprint down the mountain in panic. And perhaps they could have, if not for the wagon connected to their harness, which crashed down on top of them, mana beasts and riders alike vanishing into the wreckage.

Then the noise hit me. The screams were first and loudest, then the explosion of spellfire farther up the caravan. All the mana beasts were the worst though, terrified senseless and shrill enough in their panicked howling to cut through the rest.

Still running, I looked over my shoulder at the fight.

Beyond the thick green cloud, I could just make out the shadows of others sprinting away down the mountain road, abandoning their wagons and carts.

The asura’s shield continued to repulse the spells as the Wraith launched attack after attack, pounding the silver spell with condensed spikes of foul, poisonous magic.

The longspear thrust outward, but at the same time, the entire road *fell*.

The sudden jarring motion pulled the asura off balance, and the thrust went wide, then I saw no more as I toppled forward, the solid ground I'd been running across vanishing from underneath me.

I landed hard, crashing forward onto my elbows and the side of my face. I sucked in an agonized breath as dirt and gravel was embedded into the ruined flesh of my hand, and would have screamed if something heavy hadn't landed on me a second after. Even as I turned to see the panicking man I'd saved flailing to get off me, a boulder as large as he was crashed to the road beside us, bounced, and struck him directly, missing me by inches. Boulder and man alike sailed over the edge of the road and vanished into the cloud of dust that now obscured everything in all directions.

Unsure what had happened, I blearily stared around from my back. A small chariot beside me was overturned. A large lupine mana beast was snarling and tearing at the leather straps connecting it to the wreckage in an attempt to be free. There was no sign of the driver.

A woman's shouts pulled my attention away. It was the dead man's wife. She was crawling toward the road's edge, repeating a name I couldn't make out through the ringing in my skull.

"Stop, don't go close to the—"

A sudden burst of wind blasted away the dust for a hundred feet in every direction, revealing Raest pinned to the ground with a dragon longspear embedded in his chest. His one remaining arm was clutching the spear as he gaped up at the asura.

The mountain shook from the force of the blow, and the edge of the road crumbled yet further.

The woman's shouting turned into a scream as the rock gave way beneath her, and she was pulled into the dust-choked void beyond. The scream cut out a second later as I heard the wet impact of her body striking rock and tumbling down the steep slope.

The ground trembled again, and I realized the entire mountain was quaking. Rocks were raining down from above and bouncing over the path, and

entire sections of the road were caving in and spilling down the mountainside.

Get up, I told myself, reaching for the strength to do so. *You have to keep going…*

Shaking violently, I used my injured hand to push myself to my feet, then froze when I realized the asura was striding toward me. All around her, the wreckage of her brief battle against the Wraith painted a dire portrait. The hairs rose up on my arms and neck as her bright yellow eyes moved straight through me.

"You're supposed to *protect* us," I said, my voice a wheezing gasp, no thought of what I was saying. "Help us!"

She barely took notice, her searching gaze skating over me as she strode past, leaving the few survivors of the surrounding carts to fend for themselves.

There weren't many, only those whose mana beasts had stayed within their control or who had abandoned their vehicles. I could still hear the sounds of battle from farther up, but the asura moved with unrushed purpose, her gaze sure and confident.

Another survivor grabbed me, and suddenly I was being dragged along even as the road shook and threatened to give way beneath our feet. Over my shoulder, though, I was watching the dragon.

Gritting my teeth, I pulled free of the hands holding me up. I recognized faces, but names escaped my frazzled thoughts. Questions, pleading, but too much fear to force me or to stand and wait. Because, even as the survivors sprinted headlong down the road and away from the battlefield, I turned and followed the asura.

She must have sensed me, because she glanced back. "Go. I won't be responsible for you, and there is nothing one of your kind can do here."

I wiped blood from my eyes as I kept stumbling after her. "I'm responsible for these people. I need to help whoever I can. Not to fight, just…"

She shrugged. "You are free to choose your own death."

Her steady strides carried her ahead of me even as I jogged to try and reach a crushed wagon that she passed by without a second glance. Each jarring step was pure torture on my hand. Conjuring a sort of gauntlet of cold water to ease the flesh, I firmly put the pain out of my mind—or I tried, at the very least.

Beside the wagon, which had been cracked open like an egg when the road collapsed, an older woman lay with a man pulled into her lap. Tears spilled down the crags in her aged face, and for a moment I feared the old man was dead. As I approached, his hand patted hers, and I realized he was speaking, but the words were too soft for me to hear.

Behind the elders' broken cart, another man, brawny with deeply tanned skin, was attempting to get his family over the edge of the road and down the steep incline.

"Hey," I said loudly, waving my uninjured hand to get his attention. "There are more people over here, they need—"

The brawny man looked right at me, shook his head, and began climbing down after his family.

Taking a steadying breath and trying not to blame the man, I instead kneeled down beside the elders. "Never mind then. Let me help you up, we need to move."

"He can't walk," the old woman said plainly. "Got a bad back. I think something broke when the road jumped…"

I flinched as mana burst somewhere ahead of us, shaking the ground again. I was afraid the mountain would come down around us. "Perhaps your mana beasts—" I cut myself off, realizing the moon ox connected to the wagon was lying broken in its harness, having been struck by a large stone. "Someone else's then, there are so many…"

The woman was looking at me with such a heartbreaking combination of appreciation, understanding, and acceptance that I couldn't continue.

"We're not getting out of this, child," she said, her tears now dry. "But you can. And don't go trying anything silly. I'd rather not leave this life knowing there is blood on my hands, understand?"

I shook my head vehemently. “I’m a mage, I can…” I trailed off again, biting my bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. I didn’t want to admit it, even to myself, but I knew there was nothing I could do for them.

The old woman tried to give me a fierce and determined sort of look, but she couldn’t manage it. Instead, she looked away, leaned down, and kissed her husband on the forehead.

You are free to choose your own death, the dragon’s words echoed in my head, accompanied by the taste of blood.

Running footsteps were approaching, and so I stood, giving the two elders a small bow as I prepared to address more survivors.

The mountainside behind me shattered in a burst of mana. A shard of stone cut the air so close that I felt my hair move with its passage, and I jerked and fell again, slamming my wounded hand hard on the ground.

One of the adventurers, a quiet boy younger than me, had just appeared out of the thick wall of dust, pelting as fast as he could down the treacherous path, a few others behind him. The force of the explosion lifted their bodies off the ground, a spray of stone shrapnel ripping them to tatters.

I stared at the bodies, my breath coming faster and faster. *What am I supposed to do?*

One small figure moved, shuffling and moaning in pain. I sprinted forward and scooped up a small boy into my arms. His face was covered with dust and blood, and he pulled back from my touch as I put pressure on his shoulder, which I thought might be dislocated. His eyes moved to me, his thin brows pinching together, but his expression was vacant.

I could recognize the signs of shock well enough, but my own mind was a disordered blur. Standing, I turned in a slow circle, searching for a way to help this poor child.

Ahead of us, a wide, flat cart had overturned, blocking my view of the road. When it exploded, I jumped so hard I nearly let the child slip out of my hands. So wholly was I startled that I barely registered the figure smashing through the cart, passing by a few feet in front of me, and slamming into the ground.

The impact shook the mountain, and the road beneath my feet slid away.

Gasping, I half ran, half jumped across the sliding rock and dirt, scrambling for solid ground. For a moment, every other sound was lost beneath tons of rock crashing down the mountainside. Unsure what else to do, I threw myself behind the elderly couple's cart, which had miraculously remained on the road.

My stomach turned as the figure rose from the sinkhole, a wicked blade of black ice held in each hand. *Varg*, I remembered, the Wraith who had argued with Perhata. Gravel crunched behind me, and I spun: the asura. She advanced with her shield out in front of her, the longspear extended out over top.

"You went to all the trouble of hiding among this lot just for a scratch?" the dragon asked, and I noticed the faintest cut beneath her eye, barely more than a red line drawn across her pale skin. "If you are the best Agrona has managed in all these years, I find myself in wonder that this war still continues."

Varg did not bother with a retort but flew out into the open air, keeping well back from solid ground. The dragon wasn't bothered, of course, lifting up and floating out into the dusty void after him.

And as she did, I got a closer look at her face, her wound. Something was wrong with it. Already, green tendrils were expanding outward from the scratch, discoloring the flesh around it.

Moving with such sudden speed that I could not follow, she flashed across the space between them, her longspear a blur in the air as she lashed out in several entwined strikes. The Wraith didn't attempt to fight, instead retreating and dodging so that her strikes always just barely missed. The speed of their conflict kicked up a wind that pushed back the dust, and I squinted down at the cloud's edge. Beneath them, nothing more than a silhouette, a second figure waited, hidden.

The boy whimpered in my arms, and I shrank down and held him tight, my attention locked on the fight unfolding before me.

Each of the dragon's attacks came faster than the last, lines of silver light following each movement. Pillars of dark ice formed to deflect the blows or cut off her momentum, but Varg was beginning to appear strained, his face a mask of dire concentration.

There was another tremor, and with a jolt of fear, I hurried up the road, picking my way through the wreckage. I didn't dare to look back to see if the elders were still lying in the dirt beside their cart.

My vision wavered and my joints seared with every movement, the boy's weight only adding to the pain. A cut on my side I didn't remember receiving bled freely while the agonizing pain of my hand helped to blunt the pain from the rest of my injuries.

A massive shadow cut off the diffused glow of the sun, made blurry and orange by the dust rising from the mountainside. A beam of pure mana split the sky, so bright that I had to stop and look away. By the time I could start moving again, the black dragon was wheeling away again, five figures darting around it, spells striking with clockwork coordination.

Cart after cart had been left empty and abandoned. Some mana beasts lay dead, others had ripped free of their fittings and fled. Scattered throughout the devastation were dozens of bodies.

I quickly checked each one, looking for any survivors but only finding corpse after corpse. "One, just one," I murmured to myself, my search becoming more and more desperate. Then, as my shadow crossed over the face of an armored woman, her eyes blinked open, and she stared up at me.

I gasped, reaching out a hand only to pull back when I saw the stake protruding from the side of her armor, the wood having hit her with enough force to twist steel.

Setting down the silent child, I took hold of the stake. "This is going to"—I jerked upward, unsure if the strength of my wounded hand would be enough—"hurt!"

The woman gasped with sudden pain, but the piece of wood pulled free. I tossed it aside, then conjured a spell to clean the wound of dirt and slivers. Withdrawing clean bandages from my dimension artifact, I did my best to

stop the bleeding, then stepped back. By then, the child was beginning to whimper, and although my body screamed in protest, I picked him back up.

The woman groaned as she stood, then she conjured stone around the damaged section of her armor. “Thank you.”

“Of course, I’m just glad—”

A sudden sonic burst popped my right ear, and I wobbled, unbalanced. The child let out a cry, and the adventurer beside me winced and clutched the rock-covered wound.

Glancing out over the dusty void, I saw only the white-armored asura, her bright yellow eyes seeming to pierce the dust like spotlights as she searched for the Wraith, who had vanished. Suddenly the dragon winced and pressed the back of her spear arm against the cut on her face, which was now half green from whatever rot the Wraith had infected her with.

In that moment, Varg dove out of the dust, one blade cutting down from his right, the other thrusting up from the left.

The dragon was not caught off guard, and her spear slashed through the air, shattering first one sword, then carving through Varg from shoulder to rib cage, and finally crashing into the second blade, which exploded into a fine, glittering cloud.

But from the spray of blood, a dozen black metal spikes thrust out, growing rapidly. Most impacted harmlessly against the dragon’s shield, and one glanced off the side of her helmet. Another, however, pierced the inside of her spear arm, pushing through and out the other side, then expanding yet farther, so that in the blink of an eye, the arm was ripped free and sent spiraling, with her spear, down into the unseen depths below.

The dragon spun away from the attack, her shield sweeping like a blade and unleashing a crescent of white light, which carved into the dust in a circle around her. I fell to my knees, the boy pulled tight against my chest, just in time for the spell to part the air above me before slamming into the cliff face and carving the solid stone like so much soft winter snow.

Something hard hit the back of my head, and the world swam as the explosion of pain nearly ripped me free from the thread of consciousness I

had been hanging onto. All I could do was blink as I pressed my head down onto the back of my arm and breathed through the nausea. *Stay awake,* I thought. *Stay awake, stay awake…*

Glancing blearily around, I saw a nearby cart and began dragging the boy and myself across the ground until I was lying beneath it.

As I rolled over onto my back, the child whimpering in the crook of my elbow, I saw the woman I had just saved.

She was lying almost exactly where she had been when I first found her, severed clean in two by the asura's spell.

I stared at her for a long time, unable to process what was going on around me.

Motion caught my pain-blurred eyes, and I watched through the spokes of a cart wheel as the second white-armored dragon woman flew out to the other. They looked nearly identical, though one was now missing an arm and had green tendrils spreading from her cut cheek so that nearly her entire face was sickly looking.

Despite the rumble of the mountain warning me that this section of the road might collapse at any moment, I couldn't look away from the divine beings. Even taking the form of humans, there was still something otherworldly about them—transcendent, even. I wondered what such beings talked about. I could see their lips moving, but the distance and noise were far too great to hear.

Was she wondering what sort of creatures these Wraiths were, that they would sacrifice their own merely for the chance to wound her?

I swallowed hard. *How much is my life worth to beings like the dragons and Wraiths? Or how little?* To them, I knew perhaps the answer was nothing, but for myself, I couldn't comprehend the value of the human lives lost in that battle. *Just help…one more person.*

As the ringing in my head began to subside into a steady but painful throb, I dragged my aching body out from under the cart and stood, painfully scooping up the boy once the stars behind my eyes faded. "It's going to be all right," I said, talking as much to myself as to the child.

Two people were standing at the edge of a collapsed section of road, staring down at the scree-strewn hole that had earlier been passable ground. They both jumped when they heard me scrambling out from under the cart, and the man spun and pointed the tip of a sword at me.

“The path’s fallen down,” I said, my tongue feeling numb and drunken. I gave a little shake of my head, which I instantly regretted when a lightning bolt of pain struck out from the knot growing on the back of my skull. “Sorry, that’s a bit obvious, isn’t it?”

“Lady Helstea,” the man said, lowering his sword. “By the abyss, everyone is…is…”

“There’s no time,” I cut in, sobering as I thought of Jarrod and the adventurer I had just helped only to see her cut down again. “You’ll have to climb. Shimmy along the cliffside there. That rim of ground should hold, but…grab onto the wall too.”

The woman pulled a bundle in her arms up to her chest, and it squirmed and gave a small cry.

A baby, I realized. She was carrying a baby.

Behind the family, I saw the black dragon sweep back around, having flown up over the high peaks. None of the Wraiths were in sight.

I glanced at the boy in my arms, his eyes unfocused, his mouth open with a bit of drool dribbling down as he regarded me nervously. “Down then,” I said.

I struggled to channel mana through the fog still muddying my thoughts and had to set the child down to focus. After a moment, a wave condensed out of the air to hammer into the cart I had hidden under. Already half broken, the bed of the cart rolled off its axle, coming to rest at the very edge of the road.

“Go on, get in.”

“W-what?” the man asked, his face pale. “You can’t expect—we’ll be crushed to paste.”

The mountain quaked yet again, and high above, a peak collapsed as a stray spell lanced through it.

“You won’t,” I assured him, “but if you don’t get out of here, this mountain might come down on all of us.” Not waiting for a reply, I knelt beside the now isolated cart bed, gently pulling the boy with me. Without its wheels and harness, the vehicle looked not unlike a small raft.

Focusing on the point where the road had collapsed, I felt for the distant atmospheric mana trapped within the stone. There wasn’t enough by itself, but with the help of a competent water-attribute conjurer…

Slowly at first, then faster, water began bubbling up from the cracks in the stone. Soon it was gushing, then finally the stone broke open, releasing a flood that ran down the steep ramp created by the rockslide like a rushing river. Tentacle-like protrusions reached out from the water and wrapped around the cart.

I met the woman’s eye, then looked pointedly at the squirming bundle in her arms. “I can control the flow until you reach the bottom. But only if you go now.”

She gazed at her baby for a few very long seconds, her face pale as death, then took a step toward the broken cart. The man grabbed her arm, and she leaned forward and rested her head against his chest. “What other choice do we have?”

He stared at me with raw, bloodshot eyes. “Please…don’t let us die. Don’t let our baby…”

I nodded, all my concentration on the huge quantity of water I was attempting to control. The couple finally got up into the cart, sitting on the floor and wedging themselves between the two benches, their arms around each other and their precious cargo.

“And…I need you to watch after this little one,” I said, lifting the boy with my good arm while my ruined hand stretched out in front of me to help focus the spell.

The boy yelled out as I set him in the cart, and the man, despite his fear, pulled the boy close, wrapping his arms around them all.

“It’s going to be okay,” I assured the child as he began to cry, squirming in the man’s arms. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but I’m Lilia. And I’m going to get you out of here safely, okay?”

The boy was too deep in shock to process what I was saying, but the man understood. “Thank you, Lilia.”

The watery arms dragged the cart into the little waterfall. I nudged the water so that it pulled the cart into itself, keeping it in the center and preventing it from just plunging to its doom. Still, the flow was fast, and the cart took off with such sudden speed that the woman gave a short, sharp scream. The cart wobbled, catching air and being pulled off course, but I held it in position with the flowing water itself, so the makeshift raft was carried rapidly but controlled down the steep slope.

In an instant, they vanished into the dust, which was so thick now that I couldn’t see more than thirty feet down the mountainside.

The battle, which had for a few moments calmed, erupted again in a wave of black fire that spiraled through the sky above. I couldn’t be sure where it was coming from or who the target was. An instant later, there was a countering flash as the black dragon swept down from nowhere, unleashing a deadly breath of silver flames. Light and darkness danced against each other, swallowing up the sky.

Closing my eyes, I put all my mind and energy into the water itself, feeling its course, keeping the raft tucked into it. Somewhere below, a fireball impacted the mountainside. I felt the river buck as the couple’s screams drifted up out of the valley, but I pulled the raft down tight against the water and held on for dear life. After a few seconds, the water began to slow and spread out. That was the edge of my strength, and with a gasp, I released the spell. Instantly, the river slowed to a trickle.

My skin was warm. Eyes still closed, I turned my face to the sky; it felt like a midsummer sun was beaming down on me.

“Just help…one more person,” I whispered, hoping beyond hope that the family had made it, because that hope was all that I had.

My eyes blinked open. The sky was nothing but fire, and the heat had pushed back some of the dust. All up and down the line of carts, fireballs were raining. Rocks were tumbling down and dragging away entire swaths of the road with them. The air was so hot my lungs felt as if they were burning.

The ceiling of fire rippled, giving way from the center out, the flames untangling and then sputtering and coming apart. A dark, humanoid shape fell through. Even from a distance, I knew it was a Wraith, though I couldn't be sure which one. The black dragon's huge head followed, appearing from the center of the dying vortex as if from a portal to the abyss. The jaws opened wide, and the Wraith vanished within them.

I heard the snap of their closing even from where I kneeled.

Suddenly the air cleared, a blast of icy wind sending an enormous cloud of dust out over the dense, marshy forests that grew along the base of the Grand Mountains in Sapin. With flame and dust both gone, the full scope of the battle was visible to me.

The two white dragons remained in their humanoid forms. The injured asura was wielding her shield to defend her twin, who focused on sending bright, silvery attacks at the Wraiths harrying her. Both were now spotted with green discoloration.

Three more Wraiths still swarmed the black dragon, each one attacking in concert with the others, keeping the dragon's attention divided between them at all times. The black dragon flew low, banking so his back and wings were facing me, and I saw for the first time the network of dark green veins lacing through the black scales. *Something has poisoned the dragons, and yet they survive while three Wraiths are dead,* I thought, but I was too battered and weak to take any comfort in the thought.

Shifting, I looked around, again taking in the wreckage of the mountain and feeling the rumbling of the rockslides. *A war of attrition,* I realized. *The Wraiths can't overpower the dragons. But if they sacrifice a few of themselves to land a poison-laced blow, then they can keep their distance until the dragons are too weak to finish them. And the dragons get no closer to finding this Sovereign they're searching for…*

As I watched the black dragon closely, I saw how it wobbled as it banked tightly and snapped at a Wraith, and how, when it missed, the silver flames of its breath gleamed less brightly as they chased its target through the air.

“Just one more…” I muttered, my feet slowly starting to move again as they took me up the road.

I had to navigate around another slide that had wiped out fifty feet or more of the road. On the other side, I nearly tripped over a prone body. Leaning down, I felt the face of a young woman I had only met briefly. There was no sign of breath in her body.

Moving on, I found another corpse, then several more, and came to a place where a circle of black iron spikes had stabbed up from the ground. More corpses were pinned to them.

I stopped, growing momentarily woozy, and my gaze returned to the sky.

Spell after spell shattered against the black dragon’s scales as it chased after the Wraiths, unleashing its deadly breath at intervals. The two asuran twins seemed to be arguing, but as I watched, they suddenly separated.

The wounded asura pulled away from the other and flew toward where I had stopped. At the same time, her twin lunged at Perhata, the longspear thrusting with blurring speed. A beam of pure mana erupted from the spear’s head, carving through the air just past Perhata’s horns.

One of the Wraiths broke off and followed the wounded dragon. A dark cyclone was blowing around the Wraith, and from it issued missile after missile of ash-gray mana, each one pelting the asura’s back with a low hum.

She spun to face him, catching the last few missiles with her shield.

The cyclone grew, and as it did, more and more missiles poured from it, dozens at a time.

Through the nimbus of swirling magic that was now crashing into her from every direction, I saw the dragon lift her shield. It was glowing brightly, and getting brighter with every attack it blocked. Feeling a sudden knife of panic in my ribs, I dropped to the ground, closed my eyes, and shielded my head.

Even so, the flash that followed nearly blinded me, burning right through my eyelids.

Peeking out from under my elbow, I just saw as the Wraith's spell came undone, the cyclone tearing itself apart as the mana spilled away in every direction. The Wraith reeled, and the asura lunged forward.

Mana formed a softly shimmering silver arm where her missing limb was. This conjured fist wrapped around the stunned Wraith's throat and erupted into red gore. Spinning, she hurled the Wraith back against the cliffs, his body cratering stone and triggering yet more collapses all along the road.

A beam of white light channeled through the shield and poured into the crater after the Wraith until all hint of his lingering mana signature snuffed out.

Above, the remaining Wraiths fell back to regroup, allowing the wounded asura to drift to the road, where she collapsed onto her knees. Her twin and the black dragon seemed satisfied to watch the Wraiths from a distance, biding their time as well.

Uncertain, I stood and approached the asura. Somewhere ahead, someone was shouting…

There are still survivors, I thought, no particular emotion springing to the forefront of my fatigued brain.

"So, you have not chosen your death yet," the asura said, her voice creaking with wariness. "I am…almost impressed."

"No one here chose death," I said through clenched teeth, my lips curling back into a grimace. "To say otherwise is an insult to all those who survived the hellish war only to become collateral damage here today." Biting my tongue, I took a deep breath to steady myself before continuing. "Was it worth it? Have you even found what you wanted?"

Letting out a pained moan, the dragon forced herself to stand. She was a full head taller than me, and her bright yellow eyes seemed to burn right through to my core as she looked down on me.

“The fate of worlds outweighs the lives of a couple hundred lessers.” She cocked her head, turning to look westward over the steep incline to where her companions were hovering between us and the Wraiths. “Or even three dragons.”

27

AMONGST THE FALLEN III

THE ASURA STRODE PAST ME, and I couldn't help but take a step back as my stomach churned and my strength wilted from her aura. Despite my best efforts, I'd been trying to avoid turning my thoughts inward to examine my many wounds, but the crushing force of the asura's presence made my own pains inescapable.

Every inch of my body was battered and bruised, my ears rang, and there was a consistent, angry throbbing coming from the back of my head. I couldn't even bring myself to look at my hand, much of the skin of which had sloughed off to reveal the discolored flesh beneath.

Ahead of me, the dragon looked up, but her gaze was aimed away from the stalled battle above the mountain.

To the south, a small cluster of dark shapes was approaching rapidly over the mountain peaks. They weren't bothering to hide their mana signatures, and there was no mistaking them for anything other than what they were.

Every nerve in my body began to unravel at the sight, and I felt truly hopeless for the first time since the dragons arrived. "Was it all really for nothing?" I asked, the words a whisper on my lips.

The weight of the dragon's mana swelled, the air thick with it, her pressure palpable on my skin. Pain racked me as I fell to my knees and stared up at

the inhuman entity, sure that her mere presence would destroy me utterly.

The asura sighed.

Tears streamed from my eyes, and I involuntarily turned away, unable to bear the sight of the asura's raw power, only to see a streak like a black star bearing down on us. Unable to even utter a cry of alarm, I felt my body go rigid, then the dragon's aura manifested as a silver shield, capturing me within it by nature of my proximity.

A seething morass of black metal spikes churned around us, chewing at the barrier like a thousand grinding teeth. With a grunt, the asura shoved outward with her shield. Beams of silver light pierced the cold metal, and the spikes all burst at once, the dust of their remains drifting out over the valley below.

I had a second of pure terror to watch as the ground cracked open beneath me before I slid backward and was swallowed by an enormous, earthen maw. Broken stone, rock, half a carriage, and several tons of dirt collapsed all around me.

Reaching out, I clawed the air and watched as the one-armed asuran woman floated into the air and sped toward Perhata, then everything but the falling mountain was gone and darkness closed in above me.

Desperately, I struggled to conjure a protective barrier of water around myself. The mana sputtered and stalled as my broken concentration flailed, then swelled into existence, embracing me in a cold but buffering sphere. I bounced around as gravel, stone, and soil battered me from every direction, only intermittent flashes of light visible through the cascading rubble, then, with a suddenness that made my head spin, I came to a jerking halt.

The noise of the mountain's collapse continued everywhere at once, the rumbling inside my head, my chest, my guts. I couldn't see, couldn't breathe. My barrier was collapsing, being crushed inward toward me by the weight of the mountain. I was trapped by my own spell, pinned, paralyzed, my concentration fractured.

The spell burst. I wrapped my arms around my head, and the dirt and rocks settled on top of me. Something heavy crushed down on my leg.

I screamed, but the soil swallowed the noise. My heart was beating fast, so fast I felt like it would run up my throat.

This was it. Everything I had done—learning magic, rebelling against the Alacryans, surviving the war—had brought me here, to my literal grave. Buried alive. *Better to have died alongside Jarrod,* I thought wildly, bitterly. *At least it would have been quick.*

Then, though, I remembered the man climbing down the mountain with his family. I remembered the couple with the baby. And the boy.

They had struggled to survive, not giving up during the war or after, even continuing to fight for their lives as deities rained death and destruction down all around them.

Regular folks—farmers, herdsmen, crafters—went through all that and chose to keep trying to live…

I wriggled my arms, careful to protect my head, and made just a little bit of room for myself. Then my shoulders and hips, and made just a little more. The protective spell had prevented the soil and small stones from compacting around me, but something both hard and heavy was pressing down on my leg.

I closed my eyes, even though it made no difference to what I could see. Taking a deep breath of the thin, musty air, I listened and searched with every sense available to me.

My breath caught.

Below, not far, I could sense mana—a large collection of atmospheric water-attribute mana.

Shaking with nerves, I carefully—very carefully—began using what little mana I still had to spray jets of high-pressure water into the ground, carving out a little space.

The ground that was pressing in all around me gave way little by little. Afraid to be careless and yet knowing there was no time to collect myself, I used small bursts of water to carve down toward the atmospheric mana I

could sense, trying to make enough room to crawl forward in my little cave. But the boulder on my leg was holding it fast; I couldn’t move an inch.

Closing my eyes, I stopped casting for a moment, focusing on my breath. My head was foggy, my body had dissolved into one connected agony, and my core was nearly empty.

Pushing up onto my elbows, I gathered my strength and cast a jet of water at the stone, trying to shift it. Some chunks of rock flaked away, but the boulder didn’t move. I gathered my strength, then struck it again and again, each jet in the same spot, until, with a muffled *crack*, the boulder split. The halves slid just a little, and suppressing a scream of sheer agony, I yanked myself free.

Dirt rained down on me, then small pebbles, as the ground all around me shifted.

Gathering what felt like the last of my strength, I blasted downward with a powerful jet, and the floor of my little hole gave way.

I plunged into open air, there was a brief sensation of light against my eyes, then I hit solid rock with a jarring impact that knocked the breath from my lungs and all sense from my skull. My senses flitted in and out as I struggled against the impulse to go to sleep, then something jolted me back to awareness.

I stared up at the ceiling, which had partially crumbled where I’d blasted my way through.

What had that been? Something experienced on the outer edges of my failing senses…

Turning my neck was pure torture, but I had to find whatever had jarred me back to wakefulness. Next to me, only a couple of feet away, a spike of black metal protruded from the floor and up into the ceiling, with a network of filaments extending from it to keep the ceiling lodged in place. As I looked farther, I saw another, and then a third black spike.

Then it happened again, and I realized what it was: a voice.

Despite the bone-deep pain, I turned in the other direction, rolling onto my side and propping myself up on one elbow.

In a dim, sourceless light, I could just make out the shape of a man curled into the fetal position next to the glassy black of an underground body of water. Red eyes stared back at me, glowing in the gloom.

I sucked in a breath, and my ribs gave a stab of pain. Squinting, I realized he had long, corkscrew horns that poked up from his head, and there was a sharpness and definition to his features that made him look inhuman.

“The Sovereign,” I muttered weakly.

“Ah, you know me, good, that’s good…” He tried to give me what he must have thought was a disarming smile, but it only made him look even more predatory.

Except…something was wrong. *He has no mana signature*. Looking more closely, I realized that he was tightly bound with heavy chains and cuffs.

“You’re a Dicathian lesser, yes? But a mage, at least.” A dark tongue flicked across his pale lips. “I’m in need of your assistance immediately, as you can see. Release me at once, and I’ll—”

“What?” I yelped, unable to help myself.

Irritation flashed across the man’s face. “Do not be stupid. I am no longer an enemy of your nation. If the noise out there is any indication, your dragon allies are currently fighting against the soldiers who abducted me. Release me, and I’ll turn myself in to whichever lizard is in charge, and you’ll be a hero.”

I blinked, unable to process what was happening through the pain and exhaustion pressing on me like the fallen mountain above.

“Excellent,” he huffed. “After all this, a breathing magic user falls into my lap, so to speak, and she is an imbecile. Or concussed.” His eyes narrowed. “Lesser. You do speak this language, yes?”

I swallowed and eased myself into a sitting position. My wounded hand jumped to my ribs, which I thought must be broken. “Yes, of course,” I said

through gritted teeth. “But I don’t think I can help you. You’re a—”

“A coward,” a new voice said, a voice that had been ringing across the mountainside all throughout the battle.

I froze, unable to turn around—but then, I didn’t need to.

“Sovereign Oludari Vritra of the Dominion of Truacia.” Perhata’s feet crunched across the sediment dusting the bare stone of the floor. “Sworn in service to the High Sovereign, Agrona Vritra, father of our nation and our people. Betrayer, traitor…failure.” Perhata materialized out of the darkness. “Have I missed any of your titles, Sovereign?”

He seemed to deflate as he released a deep sigh.

Perhata kneeled beside me, took my chin in her hand, and pulled me around to face her, examining me closely. “If it isn’t the girl I promised to let live. Have you been a good little girl?”

I suddenly felt like I was back in the lightless hole, trapped and waiting to die, blind and suffocating. A cold chill trembled through my body, offset only by the wet warmth spreading through my stained and ruined pants.

Perhata regarded me with disdain. “You have survived, which I suppose should be worth something. And yet…”

Her brows pinched together, and she pursed her lips thoughtfully, then stood and moved to Oludari. There was a spark of mana, and she set a device down on the ground next to him. “Sorry for the delay, Sovereign. We were waiting on this, which Khalaen’s battle group was kind enough to bring for us. With five more Wraiths on our side, the battle above should be about over, don’t you imagine?”

She sucked in a deep breath and released it with almost giddy energy. “If there has been one good thing about your fruitless attempt to defect, it was that my purpose was fulfilled this day. Dragon blood spilled…” One elongated canine bit down on her lower lip as she suddenly closed her eyes and turned her face toward the ceiling, visibly tensing.

Then her smile faded, her eyes snapped open, and Perhata spun around, staring up through the mountain as if she could see the sky beyond. Even in

the colorless light, I could see her face turning pale.

It took a moment longer before I sensed the approaching intent.

A seething, furious anger seemed to harden the air. Three more mana signatures—even more powerful than the dragons already there—and among them, something else. Something cold and rageful and…dangerous.

Perhata spun, diving for the device. Oludari squirmed in his chains, lashing out with a knee and knocking the anvil-shaped artifact sideways. It slid in the dirt, rocking toward the water, and Perhata scrambled to get hold of it, mana building up as she tried to activate it.

“Lesser, the tempus warp!” Oludari urged. “Disable it—”

Perhata, who had for a moment seemed to forget my existence, flicked out her hand in irritation. A dark streak sped toward me, so fast I didn’t even have time to close my eyes.

There was a bright purple flash in front of me, and then someone was standing between us, a figure wreathed in violet arcs of lightning. In the figure's hand, little sparks of the purple current jumping around it, was the spike that had been aimed for my throat. Violet flames licked between his fingers, and the black spike burned away to nothing.

The burning silhouette of a wolf burst from him, launching itself at Perhata, while his head turned slightly, mid-length blond hair waving like a curtain, and a single gold eye meeting mine as his profile was revealed. “Go,” Arthur said, his voice, like his expression, dark and solemn, but beneath that, frosted over with such a bitter, cold fury that it sent a shiver down my spine.

Even as Perhata struggled against the creature in the background, spells starting to flash and fly all through the cavern, I reached out and clutched his arm. “The dragons, they…they didn’t care, they let us—”

That boiling, wrathful intent I had felt flared, and Arthur’s eyes blazed. “I know.”

Before I could say or do anything else, Arthur blinked away, his arm melting from my grasp as he reappeared on the other side of Perhata,

cutting her off from the Sovereign and the artifact. A bright beam of amethyst light swept across the dark cave, and the Wraith threw herself back, dragging the lupine mana beast with her.

A spray of black metal spikes filled the cave, launching outward from the Wraith. My senses weren't quick enough to follow them all, but at the same time, several swords molded from violet energy appeared in the air, slashing in several directions at once, each one deflecting or destroying a spike.

One speared the ground beside me, barely missing my leg after one of the swords parried it aside.

Shaking loose of my paralysis, I tried to stand only to realize that my crushed leg wouldn't hold my weight. The pain of it was a distant echo that only manifested as I began to move, but it contained no strength. Instead, I rolled over and crawled desperately toward the underground body of water.

More projectiles cracked the stone all around me, and with each agonizing jerk forward, I expected one to pierce my flesh and pin me to the ground. It was almost a surprise when my body slid down the wet slope and entered the cold water with a small splash. Shoving out with mana, I projected myself along the narrow river, pushing the current to carry me even faster. A second later, I slipped into a crack where the water drained out and was quickly pulled away from the battle.

The underground stream wasn't large, and I had to navigate entirely by my sense of mana and the current. There was no way to know whether there was an outlet ahead or I would find myself trapped in a continually narrowing gap, but I knew I couldn't stay in the cave.

When the stream became too narrow, I shoved out with as much water-attribute mana as I could still manage, breaking away outcroppings of stone that created impassable pinch-points. I swam for a minute or more, until my head began to feel light and my lungs screamed for air, before I reached the end of the crevice.

Freshly churned dirt and stone blocked the way forward. In a sudden panic, I clawed at the dirt with my good hand, but it was no use. Digging through might take hours, but I had mere seconds…

Conjuring bullets and beams of water, I blasted the obstruction. Each spell was weaker than the last. Again and again I struck it, until the water turned to mud and my core cried out with each spell. Realizing I wouldn't make it, I tried to turn and swim back upstream, but the crack was too tight. I couldn't reverse direction, and I didn't have the strength to send so much water coursing against gravity to pull me back.

My need to breathe was overpowering my ability to hold my breath. When it did, I would choke down a lungful of muddy water and drown…

I felt my mind sliding toward unconsciousness, and I was thankful. At least I wouldn't be awake for it.

Even as I accepted my fate, a sharp force tugged against my body, and I slammed against the rock wall. I was moving! The crack was so tight I scraped constantly against the walls, but the current was once again flowing, pulling me forward at increasing speed. A few desperate seconds passed, then the walls widened before vanishing. I opened my eyes.

Murky water surrounded me, but I could see light and I swam toward it, my movements wild, no wherewithal left to cast a spell to speed my ascent. It seemed so far, and I felt certain that I would still drown, that I couldn't possibly make it such a distance.

My head burst from the water and into open air, and I took the most painful breath of my life.

Somewhere very close, a child screamed.

Coughing wildly, I flailed to keep my head above water. On the shore, several figures rushed about in hurried movement. There was a splash, and strong hands took hold of me, pulling me toward solid ground. I collapsed into soft soil, heedless of the muck molding around my face. All I could do was gasp for breath.

There were voices, several, all around me, but I couldn't process their words.

A shadow passed over me, and I instinctively focused on its source. Everything was blurry, and it was loud. So loud…

The mountain, the Sovereign…

“Arthur!” I sat bolt upright, searching my surroundings.

I was on the edge of a murky, slow-moving river. Tons of stone and dirt had collapsed into it from the mountain above, nearly stopping the flow. I was in the valley at the base of the mountain. Above, it was still collapsing in on itself, the cacophonous grinding of stone on stone loud enough to make me ill.

But it was *above that*, far above, where my eye was drawn.

A truly enormous dragon dominated the sky. The battle-scarred monstrosity had bone-white scales and vibrantly purple eyes that I could see even from the ground. His wings, though tattered and worn, stretched so wide that their beating cleared the dust from the sky.

A smaller dragon, black as night and almost lithe in comparison to the big white one, flew at his flank, staying in formation. Just behind her was a man —*no, an asura*, I thought—keeping pace through the air, flying like he had wings.

The three were wreaking havoc among the Wraiths while defending two of the original three dragons that had arrived in search of the Sovereign. I quickly counted seven Wraiths, though it was difficult to keep track of them as they flitted about faster than my eye could follow. Despite his size, the scarred white dragon moved with incredible speed and precision, dodging the Wraiths’ spells or batting them away with his wings as he shot dense silver beams of energy from his mouth.

The humanoid asura didn’t attack but seemed entirely focused on protecting the black dragon, countering any spell that came even close to her. I couldn’t be certain what the black dragon was doing, only that her mana signature seemed to fluctuate strangely.

I had only seconds to take everything in before the figure crouching next to me pulled my attention back to the ground. A painful gasp burst from me. “Tanner! But what…”

The blade wing rider, who had worked for Vanesy Glory throughout the war, was bloated and discolored all down his left side. His skin was mottled

smokey gray and green, and open sores wept thick yellow fluid. Before the Wraiths had first arrived, Tanner and his blade wing had been struck by a spell and knocked from the sky, and I had assumed he was dead. Looking at him now, I was even more surprised to find him alive.

“Nice to see you too, Lady Helstea,” he said with a somber smile, wrapped simultaneously in grief and relief. “How’d you get…you know, never mind. We need to move.”

As he said “we,” I focused on the other people standing around.

There were at least twenty people hunkered on the river’s edge, all staring at me. I immediately saw Rose-Ellen, the boisterous beast tamer who had teased Jarrod at every opportunity, and her stoic bond, a large birdlike mana beast. The brawny man who’d ignored my pleas to help the elders was there, as was his family, and—

I nearly burst into tears as I saw the couple with the baby that I had helped escape the mountain. And I felt a sudden spark of hope and pride when I saw that the boy I’d rescued remained with them.

“It’s a few miles to the north and west before we reach road again,” Tanner explained, offering me his hand to help me up. “We need to get farther away from the mountain. You can see how far some of these rockslides are reaching.”

The gears of my mind suddenly began turning again, and I realized that, below all this stone and dirt not so far from where we stood, I could feel the bursts of mana as Arthur battled Perhata.

I grabbed Tanner, and he winced. “Not north. West, deeper into the marshes, as far from the battle as possible.”

Tanner looked uncertainly past me at the river. “I don’t know if we can—”

The ground shook—more so than it already was—and a towering obsidian lance at least forty feet high thrust out of the base of the mountain less than a hundred feet away. It arced through the air above us before crashing down unseen in the valley beyond. Just behind the spike, a shadowy figure sped out of the resulting hole at impossible speed.

Perhata, who clutched her side, her face twisted in a grimace of pain and fear, didn't make for the battle above, but veered south and flew at all possible speed. The air in front of her crackled with amethyst lightning, and Arthur appeared as if from nowhere. A cone of energy roared from his hand, and the Wraith dipped beneath it, unleashing a barrage of deadly spikes back at him as she flew past. But Arthur vanished, once again appearing in front of her, this time conjuring and slashing with a blade of pure energy.

Perhata screamed in frustration and rage as an armor of hundreds of small black spikes appeared around her, and she caught Arthur's wrist while blocking his blade with her upper arm. The two remained suspended for an instant before Arthur's blade reversed, the sword end shrinking as a blade grew from the other end of the handle and drove into Perhata's sternum, sparks flying where violet energy impacted the black metal.

Black flames erupted around her, throwing Arthur back and sending metal spikes raining in every direction. Even as they fell, though, they were swarming together, combining, and building on each other to form shapes.

Arthur vanished again, reappearing in the air where Perhata had been, but the Wraith was no longer there. Instead, Arthur was surrounded by several dozen armored forms, each one identically molded out of hundreds of tiny black spikes. Even as Arthur's gaze swept across them, each figure darted away, flying in a different direction.

Arthur flashed to one retreating figure, conjured a blade, and sliced it in half. The spikes splashed apart, falling to the ground below like deadly hail. There was no flesh beneath them.

As the rest of the armored figures spread out across the sky, a couple dipped lower, flying directly toward our weary group. Beside me, Tanner shouted. Someone else screamed, and everyone began to run, splashing into the water or sprinting along its shore.

I could only watch until Tanner's arm wrapped around my shoulders and he pulled me to my feet, supporting me, but it was already too late. Tanner spun me away from the nightmarish amalgamation of black spikes, putting himself between me and them.

Time seemed to slow. I felt the trembling of his tense body, saw how the spikes seemed to flow over each other like liquid, pulsing with such monstrous mana…

But my eyes were drawn to Arthur in the distance.

He was falling through the air as if sinking down through water, his eyes closed, his expression focused, thoughtful, almost peaceful.

His eyes opened with a golden flash, and his blade blurred in a sweeping cut.

A bright beam of violet energy stabbed out of the air, slashing sideways and bisecting the armored figures. Black spikes burst apart, spraying the ground in front of us and churning the soft soil to mulch.

Similar violet flashes appeared all across the battlefield, and a dozen other retreating forms came apart. The blade reversed direction, cutting back across the air in front of Arthur, and I saw this time as the blade itself seemed to vanish, and a few more of the conjured suits of armor collapsed as they were simultaneously struck by that single sweep of his blade.

But some, too many, were still escaping, flying over the mountains and across the lowland marshes. And none of the forms Arthur had struck down had contained the living, breathing body of Perhata.

Arthur’s expression tightened with frustration just before he vanished from sight, crashing to the ground some distance away in the valley.

Taking a steadying breath, I tentatively put weight on my crushed leg, reinforcing it with mana, then pulled away from Tanner. “Come on, let’s get everyone out of here.”

SYLVIE LEYWIN

Despite everything, I felt a spike of relief as Arthur’s weight pressed down on my back, the pulse of aether released by his use of God Step rippling against my scales. I kept tight against Charon’s flank, not allowing the Wraiths to separate us. Windsom was still sticking to me like my very own shadow, all his energy spent protecting me from the Wraiths’ flailing attacks.

My link with Arthur told me he was scowling despite my not being able to see his face.

‘Go after her.’

Which one? I asked, still sensing the remaining blood iron formations escaping in different directions.

Forced to dip down to the right, I avoided a jet of greenish-black mana and breathed out a bolt of pure mana back at the caster.

Arthur didn’t answer, but he didn’t have to. There was no way to know, and no reason to chase an empty suit of armor halfway across Dicathen when there were several Wraiths right in front of us, even if that meant this one escaped.

But I didn’t offer my bond any words of advice or comfort. It was neither the time nor the place for such futile gestures. Until the battle ended, I knew Arthur needed the armor of blistering fury that he had wrapped himself in, and so I remained silent. Even Regis’s thoughts were quiet as he guarded over Oludari Vritra below the mountain.

I sensed Arthur’s intention before he acted. His weight left my body, and he appeared in midair thirty feet in front of a Wraith. Aether condensed in his fist, forming a weapon. Several more appeared around him, folding into being, each one a physical representation of the apoplectic rage boiling barely contained below the surface of his composure. The floating swords all lashed out simultaneously, sweeping through the air to slightly different points.

At the same time, his primary aether sword, the one in his hand, thrust forward. The Wraith predictably dodged the handful of flying swords, putting him in place just as another thrust through the aetheric pathways and into his line of retreat. Even for a Wraith, there was no time to react as the blade thrust down through his shoulder, heart, and core before blinking away a half second later.

Gravity had barely started to pull Arthur earthward before he was on my back again, his cold fury unabated by the calculated death.

Arthur’s arrival on the battlefield finally broke the remaining Wraiths’ will to keep fighting, and all six of them split off and attempted to retreat in different directions.

“Get those three!” Charon thundered, banking sharply left and giving chase. “Windsom, stay with the patrol!”

I hesitated, knowing we were doing exactly what the enemy wanted of us. Windsom also clearly wanted to argue, but Charon was already speeding away, and Arthur’s focus was entirely on our targets. I let his fury guide me and wheeled about, dipping my head and wings and flying at top speed. One was heading south, the other two southeast over the mountains. I felt their mana signatures melting away as they focused all their energy on shrouding themselves from me.

I’m ready, I thought, holding the spell I’d been slowly weaving since our arrival.

‘Now,’ Arthur ordered, and I pressed outward with the tentative new aether art I had been trying to learn.

The air rippled in a nova around me as my magic spilled through the atmosphere. I sensed as everything—everything except Arthur and me—began to slow. In moments, the speeding Wraiths had oozed to a crawl, looking like three flies trapped in clear amber.

Arthur and I dropped suddenly, and I took a deep breath as I remembered to beat my wings. The spell took all my focus, so much that even breathing—even the beating of my heart—seemed difficult.

Arthur didn’t teleport away again. Instead, he stood and conjured his weapon. I felt myself shiver at the intensity of his focus. He carefully adjusted his stance, his form, the angle of his blade.

I knew I could only hold the spell for a few seconds total. Already, the aether was fighting me, time unwilling to be bound in this way. But I didn’t hurry him, didn’t break his concentration. It would be enough.

So complete was his focus that I couldn’t help but be drawn into it with him. Aether channeled into the God Step godrune burning on his back, and the aetheric pathways lit up in our vision, painting the sky with jagged

amethyst lightning bolts. Beyond the barriers of mana cladding their skin, past clouds of poisonous mana vapor and burning soulflame auras, into the points between armor and skin—that's where Arthur focused.

His concentration clicked into place, and the blade slashed from left to right. I felt it slipping into the aetheric pathways, first one, then a second and third, all within the space of the blade's near-instant movement. Deadly, chaotic as a maelstrom. And the sluggish, oozing Wraiths flashed with violet light.

My spell released, and I wobbled back and forth, struggling to keep us in the air.

Three streaks of bright blood sprayed across the horizon ahead of us.

28

EQUIVALENT EXCHANGE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I watched the Wraiths fall, detached, the spells that had been protecting them molting from their corpses as they plummeted toward the ground. A fine mist of blood hung in the air, marking where they each had died like incorporeal gravestones. As the red mist faded, I dug my fingers into my sternum, the discomforting itch in my core a reminder of my failures even as I should have felt the flush of victory.

Behind me, Windsom led the two wounded dragons to the ground, while Charon was still chasing the other three Wraiths north.

'Should we go after him?' Sylvie projected, her voice uncertain in my mind.

No, land by Windsom, I thought, careful to keep my anger from spilling over onto her. To Regis, I added, *What's the Sovereign's status?*

'Pissy,' Regis sent back, along with a mental picture of the bound and mana-suppressed Vritra glaring up from the ground.

Sylvie landed roughly, her claws sinking into the soft soil of the lowland valley. I leapt off her back, hitting the ground with a wet squelching, and started marching toward Windsom and the other dragons.

'Arthur…' Sylvie thought in warning.

“Which of you is the leader here?” I asked, though my eyes searched Windsom for answers instead of the two battle-worn dragons.

The large black dragon had transformed, resuming his humanoid form, which was tall and broad-chested with dark, battle-mussed hair and a short growth of beard. He had faint green traces of discoloration around his eyes and down his neck.

He straightened, bristling at the tone of my question, and took a sure step past Windsom to face me. “I am. And you must be the lesser who—oof!”

The back of my hand struck the side of his face with a crack like thunder. The asura reeled backward, stumbling.

The silence that followed was deafening. Windsom regarded me impassively, the only outward sign of his surprise the slight raising of his brows. The female asura’s mouth hung open, her red-rimmed eyes staring in disbelief at her captain. The black-bearded asura himself seemed dazed, one mud-stained hand pressed against the side of his face where I’d struck him, his eyes unfocused in my direction.

The woman, whose white armor was stained with blood, snapped out of her stupor and took an aggressive step toward me, a longspear manifesting in her grip. “How *dare* you, lesser! My sister has just laid down her life in pursuit of your goals, and you show such disrespect to one of the Matali clan?”

Windsom rested a hand on her arm, holding her back. “Do not forget yourself.” He regarded me in silence for a moment. “What is the meaning of this assault, Arthur?”

“I’m all too aware of the circumstances and the decision that needed to be made here,” I said, sharply enunciating each word. “I know what needed to be done, what the stakes were. But did the thought of saving any of those you were entrusted to protect not cross your mind? As dozens of lessers perished from the mere clash of your attacks, did their deaths mean anything more to you than a statistical sacrifice that you deemed profitable?”

“Save them?” the downed asura repeated. Instead of standing, he flew up into the air, hovering so he could look down at me. “The stakes were far too great to focus on anything but the battle. Capturing this Vritra, destroying these lessuran wretches, changes the face of the world. The deaths of these lessers, for better or worse, changes nothing.”

“And how many more of your lesser lives might be saved by what we’ve done here?” the woman spat, turning away. “I need to go find my sister’s remains. One of the Matali clan will not be left to rot here.”

Windsom moved between us. “These dragons just sacrificed one of their own to hold the Wraiths here long enough for us to arrive. It would do well for you to remember our greater purpose, Arthur.”

“I’m not blind to your sacrifice,” I said, addressing my answer to the asuran woman. “But your actions today were cold and counter to the mission that brought you here. After your callous disregard for human life here, do you expect the families of the dead will mourn your own loss?”

Her head dipped slightly as her eyes skated off me, then she was flying away.

The black-bearded asura shook his head. “You may pretend to be an asura all you wish, Arthur Leywin, but it is clear that you still have the short-sighted view of a lesser.”

“Thankfully so,” I answered, feeling some of my anger cool, pushed aside by a bitter melancholy.

The truth was these guards didn’t bear the full responsibility for what had happened here. Only one person could claim that dubious honor, and I would take it up with him soon enough. First, though, there were other important details requiring my attention.

The black-bearded asura flew after his companion, and I turned my back on Windsom and began marching away through the swampy morass. Sylvie had transformed and joined me. Windsom said nothing, but he fell into step at Sylvie’s flank.

Not far away, on the edge of a small river that had been all but strangled by the rockfall from the collapsing mountain, Lilia Helstea had gathered a

number of people, survivors of the group caught in the crossfire of this conflict. They were struggling to collect their wounded and get moving again, but all that ground to a halt as I approached.

Lilia looked like she was at the very threshold of death's door. Her long brown hair was matted with mud and blood, most of her visible skin was covered with lacerations and the start of dark bruises, and, to my horror, she was missing much of the skin on her right hand. I found myself suddenly transported back to my boyhood in Xyrus, living in her family's manor, teaching her and Ellie magic side by side, ensuring that they both awakened and formed a core. Lilia had been like a sister to me then, and I owed her more than the feeble protection she had received from the dragons.

And yet, I didn't go to her.

As the eyes of all those present settled on me, I knew my role here wasn't to offer comfort to her alone, but to address everyone as a Lance of Dicathen.

"For those who do not know me, my name is Arthur Leywin," I started. "I'm truly sorry for what you've experienced here today, but I also find myself glad to see so many survivors of this terrible battle."

"General…?"

Looking to my left, I saw a man horribly disfigured by the effects of some spell. He didn't look as if he'd survive another ten minutes, but somehow he was still standing. "It is! You're the Lance!" He looked around at the others, tired but revitalized. "It's Lance Godspell!"

The spell that my arrival had cast over the other survivors broke, and a few surged toward me and Sylvie, some thanking me, others pleading for me to get them out of there, to save them or heal them. Worst of all were those who begged me to seek out their loved ones in the wreckage of the mountain passage.

Sylv, I need you to stay with these people. Help them however you can.

My bond stepped forward immediately, seeming to shine with an inner light that drew all attention to her and silenced the survivors. "Peace, friends, please. We want to get you all away from here and to emitters. Now let's

take stock of everyone's health. Windsom, stay and help me. Be efficient but thorough; we must…"

My attention strayed back to Lilia. She gave me a small, almost imperceptible nod, and I tried to express with my eyes alone my sorrow for what she'd experienced. Then, stepping back a few paces as Sylvie and Windsom became the center of attention, I activated God Step, following the aetheric pathways back into the cave beneath the rubble.

Regis was sitting on his haunches and staring down at the Sovereign. "You should have hit that prick with a fistful of aether," he said, turning to look over his shoulder at me.

I needed to send a message, not start a fight, I thought back. Out loud, I said, "You've arrived in Dicathen on a tide of blood, Oludari. Dicathian and Alacryan alike. I am not here to negotiate or barter with you, Vritra, and I'm not yet convinced that the best course of action wouldn't be to simply kill you. Convince me I'm wrong."

"Perhaps, if you were to release me, we could converse in a more comfortable manner—"

My aetheric intent pressed down on the bound asura like a vise, stealing the breath from his lungs. "We're off to a bad start."

"All right, all right. You are just as bloodthirsty and cold as your display at the Victoriad suggested." He breathed a little easier as I eased back on the pressure I was exuding. "You're intelligent enough for a lesser, shouldn't you have figured all this out by now? Didn't you yourself see Sovereign Exeges's remains? I had no intention of falling victim to the same fate."

"You think Agrona killed Exeges," I said, pulling from what little detail Lyra Dreide had been able to provide. "Why would he do that?"

Oludari's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps less intelligent than I've been led to believe." He cleared his throat, shooting me a nervous look. "For the same reason you slurped up all the mana from retainer Uto's horn!"

I kneeled next to him, not bothering to hide my irritation. "Speak plainly, Vritra. You don't seem to understand. You are an enemy and a threat until

you prove otherwise. Keeping you out of Agrona's hands is in itself a victory, and I will kill you to do that if you don't prove your intent."

Scowling up at me, he took a moment to collect himself, then said, "Above all else, Agrona seeks the concentration of power. He thought to find it in the Relictombs, among the bones of the djinn, but all they had left behind was old baubles and their damnable labyrinth of tedious puzzles. He wasn't left empty handed, however, as he discovered the use of the runes, with which he could build his own nation of mages, powered by basilisk blood."

"I already know this," I said acidly, sensing that the Vritra was dancing around whatever point he was trying to make.

"Of course, of course," he wheedled, his conversational tactics changing by the second as he sought to placate me. "Controlling so many lessers and mages in this way concentrated their power, made it his, see? Beholden to him for everything, they can't even betray him if they wish. I have long suspected that the slow whittling down of our number in Alacrya had something to do with Agrona's lust for individual strength, but now I know for certain: he drained Exeges, took his mana for his own, to strengthen himself. He knows, you see…" He trailed off, his eyes widening ever so slightly.

I raised a brow and leaned a little closer. "Knows what?"

The Vritra rolled onto his back, attempting to look nonchalant but only managing to make himself even more uncomfortable in his bindings. "You know, I'm having a difficult time maintaining this conversation. If I were more comfortable, it would be—"

My hand was around his throat before he could finish the sentence, and I slammed him against one of the blood iron spikes that had reinforced this cave. Conjuring a sword in my left hand, I pressed the tip against his cheek until a drop of blood ran down his pale skin. "Last chance, Vritra."

Oludari's facade of dispassion melted away, revealing the terror beneath. When I released him, he collapsed to the floor facedown, his limbs pulled into an unnatural position by the chains.

“Hm. You would have made a decent Vritra yourself…” he mumbled into the silt-covered stone floor. His head turned slightly, and he rocked until he tumbled onto his side. “When we left Epheotus, there were hundreds of asura among the Vritra clan and our allies. Kezess had long played with the creatures of your continent as his little experiments, but he had ceded Alacrya to Agrona’s research even before we broke with the Eight.

“Some grew to regret their rushed flight from our home and attempted to return. Perhaps some were successful. Others were hunted down as traitors. Many more died fighting Kezess’s forces when they attacked, and some few were sacrificed within the abattoir you know as the Relictombs as Agrona tried everything to breach it with a full-blooded asura.

“But even those deaths never really explained our dwindling numbers. But as the Vritra grew fewer, the population of Alacrya expanded exponentially. Oh, the early days of that experiment. Imagine, molding an entire species in your image…” He stopped, a wistful smile softening his harsh face.

“Agrona was an accepting leader, and we were free to experiment as we wished. Who had time to wonder why half our population had vanished in the space of a century or two when there were such grand mysteries to unravel?” The smile soured, and he shook his head bitterly. “The curse of the basilisk mind. It is difficult to see what is right in front of you when your gaze is always two hundred years into the future.”

“And you think he’s been—what?—killing and absorbing his own people since the beginning?” I asked.

“Oh, no, not exactly,” Oludari continued, shuffling like a worm in the dirt. “No, he needed something special for that.”

“The Legacy,” I said without hesitation.

“Yes, *her*.” Oludari said it like a curse. “The Legacy—a spirit that carries its potential from one life to the next. Lifetime after lifetime of growth bound into one being. Agrona theorized that such a being could harness mana freely, pushing the bounds of both lesser and asuran magic. But they are exceedingly rare. Only one has ever been recorded in the lifetime of asuran civilization. And so to study one, Agrona needed to bring her here and ensure she would cooperate.”

I nodded, knowing the rest. “So from studying the Legacy, he learned how to absorb mana directly from his own people. But that still doesn’t tell me why?”

“I already said it,” Oludari answered simply. “The concentration of power. There are layers to this universe, folded over one another like the place where the Relictombs rests.”

“And Epheotus,” I probed.

“Hm,” Oludari hummed, frowning. “Not exactly. Epheotus is…something different. It is no longer here, but it is not entirely there, either. A projection of the physical world housed within another dimension. Perhaps the same one as the Relictombs, but I can’t be certain. It is interesting, but you have, without knowing it, spotted the connection.”

“What do you mean?”

Oludari sighed and closed his eyes, looking resigned. “I don’t know everything—Agrona has proven quite adept at distracting and compartmentalizing—but I will tell you what I can. *After* you release me and help me escape this place. Take me to Kezess. I will tell you both everything, and you can push him to allow me back into my home. I can be useful to the other basilisk clans, I can—”

“No,” I interrupted, taking a step back and turning around to stare into the smoothly flowing black water of the underground river.

“What?” he asked incredulously. “But why—”

‘Charon is on his way,’ Sylvie sent at the same time that I felt the dragon’s mana signature approaching.

Once again in his humanoid form, Charon swept down the tunnel left by the escaping Wraith and landed lightly in front of me. He seemed to shed his own cold white light into the dim cave. “I would have preferred you wait to speak with the prisoner until I arrived,” he said without preamble.

I waited a moment, sensing Windsom coming after him. Windsom’s feet touched the ground with a whisper, and he moved past Charon to inspect the Sovereign.

“He desperately wants to be taken to Kezess,” I said. Windsom started to agree, but I interrupted him, saying, “Which is exactly why we won’t be doing that.”

Windsom scowled and looked at Charon for support. The scarred asura was frowning, but he didn’t immediately counter me.

“Does this lesser speak for the great dragons of the Indrath clan?” Oludari snapped, spitting on the ground in his anger. “Truly you are a pathetic lot—”

Windsom’s foot pressed down on the Vritra’s neck, choking the words from his throat.

“Until we know more, Oludari doesn’t get what he wants,” I continued. That was only half the truth, of course. Really, I didn’t want to give Kezess any additional insight into Agrona’s plans until I was certain that knowledge would be shared, or at least until I had managed to acquire it myself first.

“That isn’t up to you, boy,” Windsom fumed. “Oludari Vritra is too valuable a prisoner to be left here where he might be sought again, resulting in more attacks and more casualties.”

“Which is why I’m asking for Charon to take personal authority over safeguarding Oludari. Make him too difficult a target to be worth the trouble, or even better, parade his body around and claim he was killed along with three battle groups of Wraiths, Agrona’s elite forces, while they attempted an incursion into our continent.”

Charon took a moment to roll around his response before he spoke. “So that Agrona’s spies will report the Sovereign’s death…and we dragons are able to present this as a victory to the people. Clever. And where will you be?”

“Windsom is going to take me to see Kezess,” I said firmly. “Now.”

Windsom glared, first at Charon, then at me. “I knew when I first met you that you’d be an obstinate creature. But a life in the spotlight of this lesser continent has given you the false belief that the entire world—the universe, even—revolves around you. The truth is that you are a very small piece on

a very large board, and the game does not hinge entirely on your every move, Arthur."

Unfazed, I leveled a steady gaze at the asura.

"Fine," he said at length, standing up straight and brushing dust off his uniform. "I eagerly await hearing you explain these decisions to Lord Indrath."

After sending some mental instructions to Sylvie and Regis, both of whom would be staying behind, I repeated my expectations for Charon—including that no more Dicathians be endangered—then bent down in front of Oludari. "I would suggest trying real hard to remember everything by the time I return if you want to see Epheotus again, Vritra." Finally, I stood and regarded Windsom expectantly.

Windsom looked back and forth between me and Charon, irritation carved into every line of his face. He let out a huffy scoff. "Come then, Arthur. It would seem I have been reduced to a mere taxi service between realms."

Wasting no more time, he withdrew a round, flat object and set it carefully on the floor. Drawing a drop of blood from the tip of his finger, he let the blood fall onto the disk. The disk expanded, projecting a column of light, just as it had all those years ago when he first took me to Epheotus for training.

Be careful, I thought to Sylvie. *Charon's still acting the role of reasonable leader, but I don't know if we can trust his intentions yet.*

'You too,' she thought back. *'Things are progressing rapidly now, and there is still so much we don't know.'*

Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the portal.

The air grew cool as I appeared atop the mountain, just as I had the first time. Indrath's castle loomed over me, magnificent and ominous, a structure carved from the land itself and gleaming with a thousand sparkling gemstones. The many-colored, incandescent bridge spanned the two peaks as before, and a light breeze blew through the swaying pink petals of the trees covering the mountaintop.

When I'd been brought here the first time, I had been filled with a sense of otherworldly awe. Now, though, the cold fire of my suppressed anger burned away anything except the desire to get this over with.

Windsom didn't wait for me, but marched away and across the bridge, not even looking back. I followed but remained all too aware of the probing tendrils of magic that writhed over and through me as I crossed the bridge of precious minerals.

We reached the front door, which Windsom himself opened. When I stepped through, the expansive hall beyond twitched uncomfortably, then seemed to collapse in on itself, taking me with it.

I came out stumbling in a much smaller round room. I spun around, trying to get my bearings, an aetheric sword already clutched in my white-knuckled fist.

Windsom was no longer with me, but after a second I recognized my surroundings.

The well-worn Path of Insight dominated the center of the tower chamber.

A powerful presence clamped down on the aether in my fist and expelled it by sheer force. "There won't be a need for that here," Kezess's voice rang through the room.

I stared around, not seeing him at first. Then, with a disorienting suddenness, he was standing on the opposite side of the circle worn in the floor.

He was playing a game of power, I knew, trying to unbalance me and make me uncomfortable. I took a firm grip over myself, my heartbeat slowing, each breath coming out calm. Regarding him casually, I let out a soft sigh. "Do you already know what happened?"

Kezess cocked his head slightly, sending a wave of motion through his light hair. "Windsom has explained some of it. The rest, he said you would tell me."

"Hardly welcoming of you. How long have I already been here? Surely you understand the importance of my expedient return to Dicathen."

He examined his fingernails, pointedly not looking at me. “Perhaps you would be in less of a hurry had you brought my granddaughter and Oludari of Clan Vritra with you.”

I let only a small frown show through on my face. “You promised protection for Dicathen, guaranteed that the conflict between the asuras wouldn’t spill out into the continent, but I have just come from a battleground that left over two hundred Dicathians dead, and I have no idea how many Alacryan refugees before that. How can I trust you with Sylvie or Oludari if you aren’t going to hold up your end of our bargain?”

“Yes, the Wraiths and their attack… an attack you warned Charon of days ahead of time,” Kezess mused, motionless, his bright amethyst eyes sharp and serious as the edge of a sword. “That was one point Windsom wasn’t able to clarify for me. How exactly did you know that the Wraiths were going to attack Etistin?”

“Don’t change the subject,” I countered. “I need your assurance that the dragons supposedly guarding Dicathen will have their priorities set straight. We have no use for soulless figureheads.”

Kezess’s nostrils flared, the only sign of his irritation. “Soulless figureheads? What’s next, will you snipe at me about my actions against the djinn again? I told you before, Arthur, I won’t hesitate to sacrifice one lesser life for the greater good, or even two hundred, and neither will my soldiers. But then, you understand this well. Was it not you who said you wouldn’t kill millions of Alacryans to save thousands of Dicathians? You’ve done the moral arithmetic, just as I have.”

“I’m not here to exchange barbed words, despite having plenty of choice ones stored up,” I said after a few seconds of silence. “What matters is our agreement. Your soldiers aren’t doing what you promised, and you yourself aren’t telling me everything you know. I saw how Charon and Windsom reacted to news of Oludari’s ramblings. They knew more than they wanted to let on.”

Kezess’s posture softened as he relaxed. “You are right. Your insight into aether will be of little use to me if Agrona wins the war in your world. I cannot afford for Agrona to learn everything I know, or even what I guess

at, and so I have insulated you from certain information. I will continue to do so, but I can see now that there is a need for certain things to come to light."

I crossed my arms and leaned back against the wall, relaxing slightly. "Maybe you can start by telling me why you've allowed things to come this far? You could have washed Alacrya away in a tide of blood centuries ago. An army of asura against one clan?"

"Agrona left Epheotus with his entire clan in tow, yes, and that was part of the problem. And not just the Vritra, either, but some allies as well." Kezess began to walk slowly around the worn circle that was the Path of Insight. "This action was an existential threat to all lessers and asura alike. A conflict of that scale on your world would have been devastating."

"For the lessers, yes, but for the asura as well?" I frowned and shook my head. "What's the part you're not telling me?"

"Agrona was practically daring us to go to war," Kezess answered, staring down at the path as he walked its slow circle. "His clan and their allies had been placed very strategically to ensure that any battle would almost certainly result in the destruction of your world."

I was careful to control my tone and facial features, suppressing a disbelieving scoff. "Assuming that is true, you had already committed genocide against the world's dominant culture. Where is the line? What stopped you with Agrona but not when the djinn—"

"Everything!" he snapped, his mask of complete control slipping for an instant. "Everything I've done has been to keep this world alive, and it would be wise for you to place that firmly at the forefront of any further assumptions you make about me."

In the silence that followed Kezess's unexpected outburst, remembered words echoed back to me from the last keystone trial. *He told the djinn that their use of aether was a danger to the world. And Lady Sae-Areum said he'd given them some kind of warning, something that prompted them to search beyond the borders of our world, but what had that been?*

Despite the desire to press Kezess further, I kept my thoughts to myself. I needed to understand, but I had to be careful.

Kezess stood taller, his back straightening. The tension seemed to release from his posture all at once, and he began his pacing again. “Instead of fighting a cataclysmic war, regardless of our ability to win, I sent assassins, as many and as powerful as I could risk. Many Vritra died, but Agrona proved impossible to reach.”

This, at least, aligned with what I’d been told before, but the words of Sae-Areum and of Sovereign Oludari were still bothering me. “So what does Agrona really want, in the end? What has all this been for?”

Kezess ceased his pacing and faced me. “Let me share with you a bit of our history, Arthur, so that you might better understand.

“When Epheotus was still a third continent in the ocean between Dicathen and Alacrya, the asura were much like the elves of Elenoir. Our ancestors were a people beholden to the natural world around them, in balance with it. But balance means strife, and through constant struggle, growth.

“Such was our growth that our magic surpassed the limits of our physical forms. When this happened to the djinn, they adopted the use of spellforms, empowering their bodies and enhancing their connection to mana and aether through runic tattoos. But for the asura, it was quite different.

“We sought out new forms. Physical manifestations of the raw magical ability that we had honed over many ages. We became the dragon and the hamadryad and the pantheon. And over many more ages, those traits evolved to be an inherent aspect of our races, which drew apart from one another, each branch of the asuran family tree growing more unique with time.

“We became masters of the world, subjugating both magic and the natural beasts, creatures far more terrible than those now occupying your Beast Glades. And then, as our resources ran dry and our constant eagerness for growth expanded, we began to subjugate each other. The wraiths—not Agrona’s lessuran soldiers, but an ancient branch of the asuran family tree—were the worst offenders. They were a race of war, and they built themselves up on the bones of those they conquered. Eventually, every race,

every clan, was drawn into a war that scoured the world clean, sinking continents and burning seas. We forgot that we had once been in balance with the land as conflict pushed our magic to greater and greater devastation.

“It was only when the very last of the wraiths fell that the rest of the asura saw what they’d become.”

Kezess paused, gauging my reaction.

I carefully considered the layers of his story. “Is this history or allegory?”

Kezess gave me an amused smile. “Both, I suppose. This is what happened as told by our records, but I am not merely giving you a history lesson. Agrona has forged for himself a nation entirely beholden to him. He has eliminated any rival in Alacrya. And with his armies—his rune-covered mages, Wraiths, and even the Legacy—he seeks to subjugate your world, and then he will come for mine. That, Arthur, is what Agrona wants: to take what your people and mine have built, to conquer our worlds and claim them for himself. He wants to rule all, to control all, at any cost.”

I nodded in understanding, musing over his statement while concealing my growing doubt. Oludari had been clear on one thing: Agrona was seeking individual strength, depriving himself of his most powerful allies in the process. Through my time as a king, it was imperative to understand the importance of those you surround yourself with. And if what Oludari suggested was true, then even the Legacy was meant not just as a weapon for Agrona, but a tool for him to absorb the mana of his kin.

Agrona had shown himself again and again to be three steps ahead of me, turning every situation to his advantage. And I realized then that I had always been missing something essential to any victory in war: understanding.

The very thing that Kezess himself was keeping me from.

I carefully considered his lies as my expression eased into a grateful smile. “Thank you for being honest with me, Kezess.”

29

REMEMBRANCE

KEZESS'S EYES shifted to lavender as he inspected me closely. After a lingering moment, he gave a satisfied nod. "Our agreement is one that requires a certain give and take. I trust that what you reciprocate reflects gratitude and not simply empty words."

"Of course," I answered readily. *After all, if I reciprocate your own behavior, there won't be much to owe.*

"Now, perhaps you can tell me more about your conversation with Oludari," Kezess said, leaving the Path of Insight to stand beside it. He gestured to the worn ring in the stone. "And then, I think it is well past time that we resume the transference of your aetheric insight, as agreed."

"Give and take," I said, repeating his earlier words. "With the dragons' failure to protect the people of Dicathen from their own bloody conflict, it feels unjust to ask me to hold up my own end of the bargain."

Kezess frowned ever so slightly, and his lips curled as he opened his mouth to respond.

"But I don't come empty-handed," I said before he could speak. "Instead, I have a different sort of information."

As we'd been talking, I had considered this moment carefully. Outright refusing to deliver Kezess any new insights would lead to a conflict, one I wasn't prepared to push to its conclusion, but if I bowed to his demands without countering, I would unbalance our tenuous relationship and give him more power over me.

"Sylvie is having visions."

Kezess's eyes darkened as he stared at me, but he didn't interrupt.

I explained everything, starting with the vision itself and then going back through the details of the events following her rebirth, including her seizure and what she experienced during it—although I left out the part about how she experienced it in the Relictombs.

When I was finished, Kezess turned away and stared out one of the windows encircling the tower chamber. Three young dragons were chasing each other around the mountain cliffs in some kind of martial training exercise. "You should have brought her to me immediately. Here, I might be able to help her. But traipsing around Dicathen as your glorified pet…"

He spun, and his eyes were like purple lightning. "Sylvie must be careful. Dragons rarely gain the sort of visions you describe. And any unintentional engagement of her aether arts could lead to dire consequences. From what you've said, it seems as though she was lucky to escape this dream world at all."

"She has already come a long way in her understanding. I had thought perhaps she could find additional training here in Epheotus…if we both knew she'd be safe."

"Safe?" Kezess said, the word sharp as a blade. "Would my granddaughter be *safe* here, at the seat of my power? What notions you get, Arthur. Do you truly think me so horrible that I seem a threat to my own blood in your eyes?"

"I apologize for my phrasing," I responded placatingly. "Of course, what I meant was that she would be accorded the same freedom she has now, to come and go as she pleases, to continue participating in the war against Agrona, to—"

“Yes, yes, I understand,” he said, interrupting me and waving my words away. “If it will put both of you at ease, then you have my word I will not lock my granddaughter in the highest tower and refuse to let her leave with you again should you commit to the staggering kindness of…allowing her to visit.”

Kezess took a withdrawn breath, and there was a subtle shift in his outward demeanor. “I accept this information in exchange for time on the Path. In truth, there would be little time for such a thing anyway. There is to be a ceremony of respect and returning here for the dragon who fell in Dicathen. As the Matali clan’s lord, I will host the ceremony within my own clan’s mausoleum, and then her remains will be returned to their clan-home for a proper funeral.”

“I see,” I said, my thoughts moving to what was next. “Many lost their lives there, but the death of any one person doesn’t lessen the impact of any other’s demise. I’m sorry for your loss, of course. If Windsom would be so kind as to return me to Dicathen, I will get out of your hair.”

“On the contrary,” Kezess said, his brows raising slightly. “I would like you to attend.”

“For what purpose?” I asked, confused by his unexpected request.

“As the representative of your people, on behalf of whom this dragon warrior sacrificed herself. It would be a great show of respect,” he explained.

I considered his words and the meaning behind them. *He has now sent two asuras to their deaths in Dicathen*, I thought, knowing that must have impacted Kezess’s relationship with these clans. It would be politically expedient for him to parade me around in front of these asura, but I couldn’t disagree with his logic. Although I was still furious with the dragons for how they’d handled the pursuit of Oludari, they were nonetheless my allies, and a show of respect at that moment could help keep it that way.

And, although it felt calculating even to let myself think it, I also knew that it was a unique opportunity to gauge how the other asura felt about Kezess’s decisions and the war against Agrona.

“Of course. I’d be honored,” I said after gathering my thoughts.

“Without bargaining or argument? Perhaps we’re getting somewhere after all,” Kezess said, his brow rising a fraction of an inch. “The mausoleum is being prepared as we speak.”

With those simple words, the tower gave an uncomfortable jerk, and suddenly we were standing within an expansive hall carved entirely of bright white stone. Pillars ran the length, while the walls were all set with statues, paintings, and small structures like…tombs. The center of the hall was dominated by a large marble table, atop which rested an armored figure.

Servants were hurriedly rushing around the space, but they all stopped as we appeared, bowing deeply. Kezess dismissed their attention with a faint gesture, and they rushed back to their work.

I watched, curious, as one young asuran woman breathed out a cloud of embers. They froze in the air around her, and she began plucking the embers one by one and placing them around that corner of the chamber. The result was dozens of dimly flickering flames providing a gentle but warm light. Near here, a man was flying near the ceiling, dark vines uncoiling from his arm to stick on the stone. As he slowly drifted along, the vines began to grow, spilling down to the floor. Yet another servant came along behind him, whispering to the vines. As she spoke, leaves feathered into being up and down the vines, perfect autumn leaves in muted reds, browns, and oranges.

Even more were carting in food and drink of all sorts, some carrying wide golden trays, others with huge casks of drink tossed over a shoulder. One even balanced several dozen golden plates and goblets on small whirlwinds that trailed after him like a row of ducklings. The mausoleum was rich with the scent of food, bringing back long unthought-of memories of my training here.

I stepped up to the central table, taking a closer look at the fallen asura. She looked identical to her sister with her long blond hair and white plate armor. A tower shield rested on her left side while a longspear lay to her right.

Kezess rested a hand on the edge of the bier for a few seconds as we stood in silence. Wordlessly, he then turned and began to walk along the mausoleum's outer edge, gazing at each artifact of his clan that we passed before eventually coming to a stop at a large mural of a man who looked a lot like Kezess himself. His hair was cut short and he wore a thick goatee and mustache, but the eyes and facial features were nearly identical.

"A relative of yours?" I asked, gazing up at the painting.

"One of the ancient members of our clan who brought us into Epheotus," he said softly.

I focused on the nameplate beneath the portrait. "Kezess of Clan Indrath, first of his name. And which one are you?" I asked, cocking a brow.

His lips twitched in a suppressed smile. "Too many to count now." He was silent for a while, just staring thoughtfully up at the mural. "We dragons have labored alongside aether since the days even before Epheotus was formed. And yet never have we had such an opportunity as now to deepen our insight. This 'godrune'—Aroa's Requiem, as the djinn called it—was quite interesting, but nothing a suitably sufficient understanding of aether, time, and the aevum branch couldn't simulate without the godrune itself. I need to see more."

I paced toward the next tomb, an ornately carved structure of pillars supporting a pitched roof over a featureless sarcophagus, all carved out of cool blue stone that twinkled as I moved.

"But I think that's exactly the point," I said, letting my eyes drift across the sparkling tomb as my thoughts raced. "The djinn had mastered the art of manifesting magical knowledge in the form of runes. You said it yourself, it's how they made themselves as powerful as they were. The spellforms that Agrona has copied for his people do the same thing for mana, but because mana itself is much easier to directly control, forcing it into shape and capturing it as a rune is much easier as well."

"I see," Kezess mused, moving to stand beside me and pressing his palm against a carved pillar. "These 'keystones,' then, are the djinn's attempt to forge aetheric insight into a rune that can be placed by unlocking the stone itself."

“Not exactly,” I explained, ordering my thoughts carefully. “The keystones themselves don’t forge the godrune. They contain…raw information, a sort of puzzle, that by working through, you gain insight and the godrune forms. But a keystone isn’t required to form a godrune.”

His mouth opened slightly, his brows shooting up his face before he could control his expression again, wiping the surprise away. “You have godrunes that weren’t formed by the keystones?”

Slowly, I nodded. “The Destruction rune.” I raised a hand to forestall the coming question. “It doesn’t reside with my physical form, but that of my companion, Regis.”

“So you can…spontaneously manifest a godrune.” He paused for a second. “By gaining sufficient insight into the principle guiding the power gained?”

“That’s my understanding,” I confirmed.

Kezess’s gaze sharpened as he refocused on me. “And that is all?”

I gave him a wry smile and continued on to the next artifact in line, a towering statue of a stoic woman, her likeness captured in a moment of contemplation. The warm, cream-colored marble made her look almost alive. Behind us, a dragon was conjuring down the vines to hide the portrait of Kezess the First. Another dragon had now joined the first two, and wherever they touched the vines, a black flower bloomed.

“It is, but hopefully not for long,” I continued, circling around to a topic I had hoped to cover with him. “Of the four keystones hidden within the Relictombs, I have found three. The fourth, however, can’t be opened without the third, and that one was taken from its guardian before I arrived. Quite some time ago, or so it seems.”

Kezess’s eyes lost focus as he looked into the distance. “I know nothing of these keystones beyond what I have learned from you and your time walking the Path of Insight. But…” He turned, walking away from the statue and across the hall.

There, a shrine of sorts was set up. Several silver candles burned, giving off a sweetly scented smoke that rose up to frame a portrait affixed to the wall. The painting portrayed a woman with very light blond hair done up in a

series of braids that wrapped around her head like a crown. She was a very handsome woman with a refined and noble look. I didn't recognize her at first, but as I took in her iridescent lavender eyes, captured with stunning detail in the painting, I realized who I was looking at.

"Sylvia…" I said under my breath, an unexpected wave of emotion washing over me. "I…never saw her in this form."

Kezess gently waved his hand in front of the altar, and the smoke coiled and whirled. Through the silver smoke, I saw not the woman but the draconic form I could still picture as clearly as if I'd left her only yesterday, pearl white and covered in glowing golden runes.

Then the smoke settled, and the portrait returned to its original state.

"Fate is a strange thing, Arthur," Kezess mused, both his tone and expression unreadable as he looked at the image of his daughter. "Despite our inability to communicate or cooperate, I did learn a few things from the djinn. They had discovered the interwoven connection between aether and Fate itself, believing it to be a fourth aspect. I always thought they must have hidden this knowledge in the Relictombs. I feared, in fact, that Agrona had captured some piece of it."

His eyes jumped to my face. "I can see it now. Four keys designed to unlock within the user depths of insight meant to then, in turn, open the way to understanding Fate itself."

I hesitated, unsure how to respond, but Kezess let out a small, knowing chuckle.

"No need to deny it now. I've been puzzling over what this Aroa's Requiem meant, and what little of the other godrune you gave me. Realmheart…an ode to my daughter, I presume?" He scrutinized Sylvia's picture for several seconds before continuing. "Now it makes sense. The djinn, along with my own daughter, sent you on a journey to gain control over Fate itself." Kezess gazed up at the portrait again, and I saw real sorrow bleed through for the first time. "Sylvia's final betrayal…"

"Not a betrayal," I said firmly, squaring up against him. "She knew who I was, even then. She must have believed this was the best way forward. You

couldn’t have reached the keystones, and neither could any agent you might have recruited from Dicathen. How many people would you have sent to their deaths in search of the keystones had you known sooner?”

“It hardly matters now,” Kezess answered, his voice flat. “Do you even understand what you’re asking me?” He turned his back on Sylvia’s image. “To help you, I am by implication condoning your acquisition of whatever insight the djinn have secreted away. For that level of power to be condensed into one human…” He gave a small shake of his head, and his voice lowered as if he were speaking to himself. “Perhaps it would be more prudent simply to kill you now, prevent anyone at all from gaining this knowledge, just as I did before.”

My instincts kicked in, urging me to step back and shift my footing into a battle stance, but I held my ground.

The room flickered, the light jumping slightly, and Kezess was no longer standing in front of me. I spun, finding him ten feet behind me, his eyes the blazing amethyst of my aetheric lightning.

“The djinn who told me about Fate also told me something else.” Kezess seemed to crackle with power, a pressure unrelated to his King’s Force building in the mausoleum. The other dragons seemed momentarily frozen, their gazes carefully averted, their faces blank. “A small faction had broken away, was attempting to reclaim this knowledge, which he said had been locked away.”

“Do you think one of these djinn might have taken the keystone, then?” I asked, keeping the tension from my voice.

“Perhaps, but no sign of such a thing ever came to my attention. If they did, the keystone you seek likely burned with their world.” Kezess gave a small shake of his head. “Perhaps it is for the better.”

I stood thunderstruck. I was so certain that it had been some agent of Agrona, one of thousands upon thousands of ascenders he had sent to their deaths in the Relictombs, who had taken it. Could the answer really have been right under my nose the entire time?

After all, who had sheltered the rebel djinn as the rest of their kin carried on with their work, even as the dragons burned their civilization to the ground?

“Sylvia herself set me on this path,” I finally answered, looking back at her picture and trying to reconcile the woman’s face with the person I had known. “She thought it was so important that she embedded knowledge of how to find the ruins housing these keystones in my core.”

“My daughter had many strange and, in the end, unfortunate ideas,” Kezess said matter-of-factly, his aggression vanishing as quickly as it had surfaced. “Do not forget that it was her own uninformed love for a creature as cruel and vicious as Agrona that resulted in her death. But I think we are done for the moment. Before the ceremony, however, perhaps you would like to… freshen up.” His gaze flicked up and down my clothes, which were still stained from the earlier battle. “After the ceremony, Windsom will return you to Dicathen, and I will ensure Guardian Charon emphasizes the protection of your people in future altercations.”

After being taken to a bath and given a change of clothes in the form of a perfectly tailored suit of some soft black fabric I couldn’t identify, I returned to the mausoleum. It was almost gloomy, like a forest at twilight, after having been completely transformed. With the tombs and sculptures hidden by curtains of flowering vines, the remaining space was smaller and more personal. Ornate tables were lined with golden trays of food and both bottles and casks of drink. Golden goblets stood like rows of little soldiers between each cask, and every table was flanked by a servant.

An altar had been set up at the foot of the dragon’s funeral bier, on which sat a shallow bowl of oily red liquid. From the center of the bowl, a bittersweet incense was burning and putting off thin coils of smoke.

Windsom was standing at attention by the door as if waiting for me to arrive. His military-style uniform looked even more crisp than usual, and there was an unreadable heaviness to his alien eyes. He gestured me in with a simple wave.

“Hello again, Arthur,” he began, his voice crisp and devoid of any emotion. “Lord Indrath has requested that you occupy this position of honor with me. As this is a ceremony of returning and is being hosted by Lord Indrath, we act as his envoys, the first to welcome any who attend.”

Despite my surprise, I moved to stand beside Windsom. My arrival was timely, as the first guest stepped through the door only a minute or two later.

The black-bearded dragon from the battle missed half a step as he saw me, his hand going to his cheek. There was no physical mark to show where I’d struck him, but clearly the mental scar was still fresh. He had left behind his armor, appearing in a fine black suit much like my own.

“Welcome, Sarvash of the Matali clan,” Windsom said, extending both his hands.

The dragon, Sarvash, wrapped both hands around Windsom’s right. Windsom’s left hand then pressed against the back of Sarvash’s right.

They held this ritualistic posture for a couple of seconds, then broke away.

Behind Sarvash, the other survivor of the battle in Sapin walked arm in arm with another man. She had likewise left behind her bright white armor, as well as her shield and spear, and now wore her hair in a long braid down her left side, standing out in stark contrast to the darkness of her mourning dress.

The man holding her arm was slightly shorter than her, and much rounder. His own hair was gray-blond, thinning slightly on the top. He was clean-shaven, revealing round cheeks beneath umbral gray eyes. Baggy black cloth draped from his large frame.

“Welcome, Anakasha of the Matali clan,” Windsom said, reaching out for the woman’s hands.

“Windsom of the Indrath clan. It is a great honor for one of such rank to welcome my fallen sister’s return to Epheotus. On behalf of my clan and clan-friends, thank you.”

“The honor is mine,” Windsom replied solemnly.

At the same time, Sarvash reached for my own hands, his nostrils flaring and his gaze focused on the floor instead of me. Copying Windsom, I took his hands. He released me almost immediately and continued into the mausoleum, where one of Kezess's many servants escorted him to the bier resting at the center of the room.

Anakasha, the deceased dragon's twin sister, moved from Windsom to me. Unlike Sarvash, she held my gaze with deadly intensity as we repeated the formal greeting.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said consolingly.

A fine line formed between her brows as she gave me the smallest of frowns, then she pulled away.

Beside me, Windsom was introducing the third asura. "Welcome, Lord Ankor of the Matali clan."

They exchanged the formal handshake, and then he was standing in front of me. He held out his hands in an automated fashion, seemingly oblivious to me beyond my mere presence. We shook, but his red-rimmed gaze never met my own, and when he turned away after a couple of seconds, he stared around as if lost until Anakasha took him by the arm again. A different dragon bowed to them and then followed after Sarvash and the other.

More dragons arrived after that, some introduced as members of the Indrath clan, others of Clan Matali. There were a few dragons from other clans, and even a couple of pantheons, though there were no members of the Thyestes clan, including Kordri.

I found my thoughts drifting off. My course after Epheotus still wasn't clear, and the decision weighed heavily on me. Getting to Oludari before Windsom whisked him back to Epheotus was pressing, but the keystone was even more so—and this was perhaps the first time I'd had a real lead, shallow as it was. Despite that, I was also separated from my companions and family, and I felt a growing urge to reconnect with them as well. But a decision would need to be made, and soon.

"Welcome, Lord Eccleiah, representative of the leviathan race among the Great Eight."

I reached automatically for the next pair of hands, then I saw who I was shaking hands with, and my focus was wrenched back to the present. The man in front of me was as different from the dragons as a dwarf was from an elf. He had pale skin, so light it was almost blue, and was so wrinkled he looked to be a hundred years old. *Which means he's probably many times over that.* Ridges ran along his temples, open like gills, and beneath them, his eyes were milky white in color.

His hands were cold against my own, but his grip was firm and confident. "Ah, the Leywin boy. At last."

"Welcome, Lady Zelyna of the Eccleiah clan," Windsom said next to me, taking the hands of a fearsome looking woman.

She had a similar aquatic look to her as the old man, with aquamarine skin that darkened to a deep, navy blue around the ridges that ran along her temples. A shock of sea-green hair grew like a mohawk and floated above her, almost as if she were standing underwater. Her dark garb and her expression—just as dark—both suggested she could be there either to mourn the fallen dragon…or to pick a fight.

When her stormy blue eyes turned to me, I strongly expected the latter.

Lord Eccleiah's right hand released mine, and his arm swept around my shoulder with unexpected familiarity. "Let me introduce you to my daughter, Zelyna. Zely, this is Arthur Leywin. A human! They're from the land of Dicathen, if you didn't know. Fascinating, isn't it?"

Zelyna released Windsom as if his hands were covered in feces, and she crossed her arms and glowered. "I know who he is well enough, Father." A muscle in her jaw twitched. "The lesser who killed Aldir…"

Windsom cleared his throat. "Please, if you would be so kind, make your way into the mausoleum. You will find the Matali clan over there, as you can see, should you wish to offer your condolences."

A bright-eyed young servant bowed and offered her arm to Zelyna, but she ignored her, choosing instead to force a falsely sweet smile onto her purple lips. "Of course. Thank you, Loathsome—I mean, Windsom. Forgive me my stumbling tongue, it is a long journey to Mount Geolus." The smile

slipped away and she shot me through with a blistering glare, then whisked off to Lord Matali without waiting for the servant.

Meanwhile, Lord Eccleiah still had his arm around my shoulder. “Oh, don’t worry about her, Arthur. Is she outwardly upset with you? Yes, but as you executed the man she hoped to wed, I’m certain you can understand why. Being magnanimous, you won’t hold her hostility against her. Besides, I strongly doubt she’ll run you through with anything but her eyes.”

“I—what?” I blinked at the asura.

“Ah, but, although Aldir and I were old friends, I have led my people far too long not to understand such necessities.” Lord Eccleiah paused and looked at me knowingly, his nose a scant few inches from mine. “But let us speak no more of this sad tale, because we are here in support not of the Thyestes clan but of Lord Matali and his people.” He gave my shoulder a friendly squeeze. “Come, join me, and I will teach you the traditional mourning words of our race.”

“I’m afraid I can’t, my lord. It would be remiss of me to abandon my duties—”

“Oh, I believe we are the last,” Lord Eccleiah said happily as he steered me away from Windsom.

But we didn’t approach Lord Matali or his daughter, or even the bier at the center of the room. Instead, we circled around the bulk of the attendees and made our way to the back corner of the chamber. Once there, his thin but powerful arm slid off my shoulder. I scanned the room, but no one was paying us any mind, except perhaps for Zelyna; I thought I caught her looking away just as I turned.

“What do you really want with me?” I asked softly, quiet enough to make sure we wouldn’t easily be overheard. “I’ve met enough asuras to know this dotty old uncle routine is just a pantomime put on to lower my guard.”

The leviathan smiled warmly. “I won’t blame you for thinking so. Indeed, spending all your time with the likes of the Indrath clan and even Wren Kain IV, it would be quite unlikely for you to come to any other conclusion. But I assure you, I am not inclined to falsely represent myself, not for you

or any other. I am too old for such a thing, and it isn't in the leviathan's nature. Which is exactly why Zel—forgive me, Zelyna—will have such a difficult time not outwardly showing her desire to pick her teeth with your bones."

I let out a surprised laugh, then sobered. "Were she and Aldir really…?"

Lord Eccleiah smiled fondly, but I detected a wry bent to the emotion behind it. "Ah, well, perhaps it was more complicated than that, but I won't risk her ire further by talking any more about it. It has been a very long time indeed since we leviathans held the tradition whereby rulership was passed down to the young who proved capable of murdering and devouring their parent, but I would hate to give my daughter reason to resurrect the tradition." His eyes twinkled as his smile softened. "Forgive me. I simply wanted to exercise my curiosity about the lesser bonded to a dragon and gifted with an asuran physique. And all that despite having no mana signature, none at all. You are the most interesting development to come from the old world for a long, long time."

"The old world?" I asked.

"Most don't think of it as such, perhaps." One side of his browless forehead scrunched up. "But then, most asuras don't think of it—or the lessers who live there—at all, despite the connection that still binds our world to yours. But never mind all that. Lord Indrath will be arriving momentarily."

He held out his hand, palm up. Resting on his palm were three small, bright blue pearls. As I let him roll them into my own hand, I realized they were full of liquid. "A gift from the Eccleiah clan to the Leywin clan. Tears of the Mother…or mourning pearls, if you prefer. Powerful elixirs."

"Thank you, Lord Eccleiah," I said, rolling the marble-sized pearls around on my palm and watching the bright blue liquid inside bubble as it shifted.

"Veruhn. Let us leave the 'lord' stuff for meetings of the Great Eight, shall we?"

"Thank you, Veruhn. But my…clan has done nothing to earn such a gift," I said, trying to hand them back.

“This is not a gift of earning,” he replied, taking half a step back. “It is a gift of respect, of…acknowledgement. Such things are meant to be given, yes?”

Before I could respond, there was a flaring of mana and the sudden appearance of a heavy weight on me. Looking around, I immediately found Kezess standing beside the bier, his back to me. The pressure receded immediately.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said as all eyes turned to him. “And thank you to the Matali clan for allowing Clan Indrath to host this returning ceremony. It is a tragedy of unparalleled proportions whenever a dragon warrior is taken before their due time. And yet we also celebrate those who sacrifice themselves in the defense of their clan, their race, and their home, as Avhilasha did when she faced the soldiers of our oldest enemy, Agrona Vritra.”

There was some hostile mumbling at Agrona’s name.

“Now, join with me in showing our respect for the fallen. Anoint yourselves with her heart’s blood so that we may all be, in this moment, one clan, the asuran clan, bound together from now back into time immemorial, a single lineage in our remembrance.”

Kezess stepped around to the front of the bier and dipped two fingers into the red liquid. He touched his red-stained fingertips to his temple, then splashed the last couple of drops across the deceased dragon’s white armor. Stepping aside, he bowed his head.

Anakasha stepped forward next. When she dipped her fingers, she touched just below the corner of her right eye, and a red tear ran down her cheek. Then she, too, flicked a few drops of crimson across her sister’s armor before moving to stand beside the bier, her hands resting atop it next to the spear.

Lord Ankor approached the bowl next, but he only stood there, incense slowly rising to frame his face. After waiting several seconds too long, Sarvash stepped forward and helped the unusual dragon dab his fingers. He smeared the substance haphazardly across his face, then flicked the

remnants all over the altar around the bowl. Sarvash quickly made his own obeisance, and together they moved to Anakasha's side.

I felt Lord Eccleiah lean in beside me. "Go. They will all expect you to forgo this ritual, or to go very last per your station as a lesser. It will emphasize that you are here as an equal to show respect to the dead if you do not wait."

Not seeing any reason why the old leviathan would mislead me, I joined a queue beginning to form. More than one dragon gave me a surprised look or did a doubletake, but no one intervened with my presence there.

When it was my turn, I dipped three fingers in the liquid—it was thick and oily to the touch—and dragged it across my closed eyes like warpaint. "I am not blind to your sacrifice," I said softly, repeating the words I had given her sister. From the periphery of my vision, I saw Anakasha's eyes narrow as she watched me closely.

Carefully flicking the last couple of drops of ointment over Avhilasha's armor, I stepped aside, moving to stand beside Kezess, my head similarly bowed.

The ritual continued until everyone had anointed both themself and the deceased. By the end, her armor was so spattered with dots of red that it looked as though she'd just returned from the battlefield.

After the anointing, the remembrance began. It was true to its name: a retelling of Avhilasha's life by her clan, her family, trainers, and friends. One elder joked about her hatching with a spear in her hand, while a young dragon recounted how she had out-trained him every day for forty years straight, and no matter what he did, he could never keep up. Her sister described their endless rivalry for the respect of their parents and lord before telling the tale of a hunt they had taken together when they were only seventy years old, and how her sister had both managed to save her life and still slay the seven-headed serpent without taking a wound.

Over the next two hours, these and many more stories were shared, some amusing, others impressive or even startling, but all tinged with somberness and loss.

When it was done, Kezess stepped in front of the bier again. “And so we remember the fallen warrior, her deeds both great and small, and the shape of her in our shared lives entwined by her heart’s blood. Please, stay as long as you wish, nourish your body with our food and drink, your mind with conversation, and your spirit with shared mourning.”

The low hum of conversation that followed his statement was like a dull roar after the solemn focus of the earlier story-sharing.

I noticed that several asura immediately went to the Matali clan and handed over a series of small items. Gifts, I expected. Reaching into my pocket, I rolled the three pearls around, wondering. A surreptitious glance at Lord Eccleiah, who was sampling some kind of rolled and skewered sea creature, did nothing to reinforce my sudden suspicion.

What was it he said? “Such things are meant to be given.” The leviathan would have known about the gift-giving, of course. Had he correctly assumed I didn’t, and prepared me for it ahead of time? But why? *Would it be an insult to give away what he gave me?* I thought about the words again and made up my mind.

When a four-eyed pantheon stepped away from Anakasha, I approached. “Lady Matali,” I said soberly, pulling the three orbs out of my pocket. I cupped them in both hands and bowed slightly, holding them out. “Your sister’s sacrifice was made for my people. I know what I give you today in return is nothing compared to the sacrifice of the Matali clan, but I want you to have these: three Tears of the Mother to mark this day of mourning.”

There was a sudden burst of murmuring from throughout the mausoleum, but the tall asuran woman only stared down at my offering, looking shocked.

It was Lord Ankor who reached out, but he didn’t take them. Instead, he closed my hands around the pearls and gave me a quivering smile, his eyes glistening with tears yet to form.

Sarvash looked pale and crestfallen. Anakasha herself was unreadable, her gaze distant. Neither said anything, and so, with the pearls still clutched in my hands, I bowed a little deeper, stepped back, and turned away, uncertain if I had read the situation correctly. But I caught the old leviathan’s eye for

just an instant as I turned, and he winked before stuffing a skewer in his mouth.

Suddenly uncomfortable, I moved away from the crowd, contemplating whether to return Lord Eccleiah's gift back to him. By the time I tore my gaze from the pearls once more, the leviathan was gone.

Unable to find him through the crowd, however, I instead made my way along the edge of the dark curtains hiding the Indrath tombs, trying to understand why Veruhn had given me such an apparently valuable gift. Keeping myself from second guessing, I imbued the extradimensional storage rune on my arm and sent the pearls within, not wanting anything to happen to them.

Remembrance.

Another item in my storage rune called out to me. I felt a wave of sentimentality wash over me as I considered the item, but I didn't immediately withdraw it. Glancing around, I assured myself that no one was paying too close attention, and I slipped through the black-flowered vines and into the small alcove on the other side.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding, and my shoulders sagged as I relaxed. The noise of the subdued conversations was muffled, the burning sensation of so many gazes following me cooled, and I let myself sink down into the isolation, casting off the obligatory noble veneer like a cloak.

Lady Sylvia Indrath watched me from her portrait on the wall.

I withdrew her core, holding it delicately in both hands. There was no aether left in it, or any mana for that matter. No message, no hint at how to continue. It was simply the empty, dried-out organ of a deceased dragon. Soon enough, the asura lying on the bier thirty feet away would be little more than this. But she had been. I'd heard her stories, seen her sacrifice. Despite my rage at how the dragons had failed to protect the people on that mountain, I also acknowledged that they had been ready to lay down their lives to fight the Wraiths.

The core in my hands wasn’t Sylvia any more than the spear and shield resting beside Avhilasha were her. I still couldn’t wrap my head around what Nico meant by sending it to me, but I was pretty sure that he himself didn’t know. He was fumbling, scrambling to do whatever he could to help Cecilia.

Just like back on Earth.

I closed my eyes, leaned forward, and pressed my head against the core’s rough surface. I hadn’t been here for her own remembrance ceremony—didn’t even know if Kezess had given her one—but she deserved something, no matter how small.

There were doors inset in the front of the shine holding the silver candles. I opened them, and inside was a small bowl full of oily red liquid. An empty incense holder stuck up from the center of the bowl. Carefully dipping in the tip of a single finger, I closed my eyes and pressed it to my forehead between my brows.

“You opened my eyes to a life I had yet to live. Saved me twice from a death come far too soon. Trusted me with a vision of the future you wouldn’t live to see. And”—my voice grew rough—“most important of all, welcomed me into your family in name and act.” I let a single drop of ointment drip on the core and set it carefully on top of the incense holder. “I’m sorry Sylvie couldn’t be here, but I will bring her someday. When she is safe.”

I carefully closed the doors and stood, a subtle weight off my shoulder as I left the core behind. The eyes of the portrait seemed to follow me, perfectly capturing that unknowable depth of understanding that Sylvia had reflected when alive.

Swallowing the emotion creeping up the back of my throat, I slipped through the vines and met the ocean-blue eyes of Zelyna standing a few feet from the alcove. She frowned and turned away.

30

COLLISIONS

CHUL ASCLEPIUS

I sank back against the wall, breathing heavily and enjoying the feel of sweat pouring down my face. The cavern smelled of ozone and crushed granite, and the resounding noise of our training was still ringing in my ears.

Bairon leaned forward and rested his hands on his knees, sweat dripping from his nose, each breath laborious. Twenty feet to his left, the little one, Mica, threw herself on her back, huffing and puffing. Only Varay stood straight, her arms crossed as she eyed me thoughtfully.

“This was better, yes?” I asked, going back through in my mind each stage of our sparring. This was unlike the technical training I had done with the Vritra-blooded one, Cylrit; the Lances had pushed me to work with my body differently, and I had strained them to the peak of their capabilities—at least without threatening their lives. “Arthur’s guidance about using what little mana I have in the best way is starting to make sense, I believe.”

Bairon let out a scoff that didn’t disguise his contented grin as he sank down to one knee, leaning on the crimson asuran-made spear he wielded. “That spell layering technique…was that Arthur? Seems like…something he’d come up with.”

I grinned. The human was right; Arthur was quite good at utilizing small amounts of energy to great effect, an unlooked-for boon in my traveling companion. My body required the mana output of a full-blooded asura to maintain itself, but my djinn father's blood had prevented my core from growing to its full potency.

"Your control is improving," Varay said, watching me closely. Her gaze flicked to the dull metal bracer on my wrist.

I shifted uncomfortably, realizing I had forgotten about keeping up my appearance as a mere human. "Ah, yeah, this has been good. But you all are making progress as well."

Mica slammed a closed fist against her sternum three times. "I sure hope so. My core *aches*. Am I the only one? I think it's…growing clearer. Purifying more. It's been a long time though, so…I'm not really sure."

"Yes," Varay answered, stretching her arms over her head. "I feel it as well. Arthur was right. Our exertions are beginning to pay dividends."

Bairon stood and wiped sweat from his brow. "What do the artifacts say, Emily?"

A small human in glasses came out from behind a barrier shrouding one corner of the cavern. She gave her fellow human a pained smile and shrugged. "There has definitely been refinement of your cores, that's easy enough to see, but the enhanced speed of your mana activation and channeling is still too fast for the equipment to make an accurate reading, even with the upgrades. Maybe if I had more time, but…"

Mica snorted and rolled over onto her side, propping her head up on one hand. "Yeah yeah yeah, you scientists and your big secret project. Remember when the Lances were treated like we actually mattered?" She sighed and mumbled, "Mica remembers."

Emily roughed up her curly hair with one hand, then straightened her glasses. "S-sorry, it's just…"

"I have heard that Wren Kain can be a harsh taskmaster," I said, recognizing that the girl seemed less energetic than before, darker even.

“Do not let the titan grind you to dust under the heel of his drive for progress.”

Her brows shot up as she gave me a startled look. “Oh, uh, thanks…yeah, I…won't?”

“When is Gideon going to explain what he is up to, anyway? It’s not like I haven’t sensed those mana beasts he had brought in.” Mica’s eyes narrowed at Emily. “For reals. I’m a general, I should be in the know.”

Emily’s gaze settled on the floor, a shadow passing over her pale features. “I don't think I’d want to say even if I could.”

“Gideon and the asura have their reasons for secrecy,” Varay said sternly. “Don’t harass the girl. It isn’t her choice, and she will do well not to speak of what’s happening down there.”

“Wait!” Mica bolted upright. “You know, don’t you! Why do *you* get to know?” Her glare shifted to Bairon. He gave her a shrug, resting his spear across his shoulders, and she gasped. “You too? What the hell, you guys?” Finally, her glare settled firmly on me. “Don’t tell me that everyone here knows except for me?”

Pushing away from the wall, I stood straight and cracked my neck, already feeling refreshed from the rousing spar against the three Lances. “No, Lady Earthborn. I have little interest in the machinations of the titan. They make good weapons, but I already have one of those.” I gestured to Bairon’s spear. “Though not perhaps so refined an implement of destruction as your spear, Bairon Wykes. You should listen to it more closely. It seeks to guide you, to teach you to fight like an asura. More than once, you missed an opportunity to land a blow because you fight against your weapon and not with it.”

The human ran a hand along the shaft, considering the crimson steel. “I am fighting with the spear, as I have been for months. But your words make a kind of sense. I can feel the guidance you speak of, only…” He shook his head, then gave me a suspicious look. “You sometimes don’t speak like a man, Chul. You speak as if—”

Mica snorted, interrupting him. “You just don’t want to admit that we’ve been training toe to toe with one guy, and he seems to be as strong as the three of us together. It’s like Arthur all over again.”

Bairon turned in exasperation to Varay. “Surely *you* see it?”

Varay’s piercing eyes lingered on me as I turned away. She frowned slightly. “Are you okay, Chul?”

My fingers dug into my temple as a sudden pressure pinched inside my head. “Yes, I…you three pushed me harder than I thought. That’s all. I—”

Inside my skull, I heard Mordain’s voice as if through a thick door, dulled by distance and my own poor ability to receive it. *‘Chul, forgive this intrusion into your thoughts. I have need of you immediately. Leave what you are doing and return to the Hearth at once. Be wary on your journey. The Beast Glades are not safe.’*

As the message faded, I straightened and shook my head slightly, trying to knock loose the discomfort. Fear gripped me—not for myself, but for those I had left in the Hearth. Were they under attack? There was no way to know except to leave Vildorial and return home.

“I must go.” I looked between the Lances but settled on Varay. “Tell the Leywins—Eleanor and Lady Alice.”

She frowned. “Of course, but…”

The three Lances were all looking at me with concern, but I did not explain further, instead hurrying from the cavern, which was well away from where people lived. Still, it didn’t take me long to reach the surface from the outer tunnels. None of the dwarven patrol stations gave me pause, being more concerned with anyone coming in than going out. Less than twenty minutes had passed before I was standing beneath the bright desert sun that hovered over the Darvish dunes.

I didn’t stop to take in the scene but lifted off the ground and pointed myself eastward, flying at speed toward the mountains.

I had not expected Mordain to call me back from my quest. In truth, I hadn’t been sure he would want me to return. He was a kind man, a good

man, but I had never understood his willingness to “turn the other cheek” as he put it, no matter what insult was offered. I, on the other hand, knew that sometimes the only right answer was overwhelming force. Some crimes could never be made up for and should never be forgiven.

Even as a child who did not yet understand what I was, my fiery temperament had made me stand out from the others. Although traveling with Arthur and fighting back against Agrona was exactly what I wanted, I still wasn’t fully certain that it had been allowed because I wished it…or simply because it got rid of me.

This doesn't matter, I reminded myself, crushing the unwelcome thoughts within the vice of my will. *Mordain needs me, and I will go. And when I am done, I will return and resume preparing myself to devastate our enemies, even if Mordain will not.*

The flight was long and tiring. It took little mana to sustain flight once it had been achieved, as I only needed to maintain the balance between myself and the atmosphere around me, but it did require a level of focus that I found grating. Growing up beneath the ground, I hadn’t practiced often.

It was with a grateful breath of cold air that I crested the Grand Mountains and dipped down into the Beast Glades. Finally, I slipped free of the uncomfortable cuff Wren had designed to mask my mana signature so that I appeared human even to the dragons. Here, it was more important that I project my own natural mana signature, which would ward off the native beasts.

Home was close.

CECILIA

The air was thick with the buzz of insects and the haunting susurration of some unseen beast. A smell like rotten eggs oozed up from wet, sucking ground. And, worst of all, the rift—the connection between the asuran homeland of Epheotus and the Beast Glades of Dicathen—was still hidden from me.

It shouldn’t be this difficult, I thought, my frustration interrupting my focus.

I pulled back from the search, resting my senses. It had been days already… days spent in the dank depths of the worst the Beast Glades had to offer with no company but Agrona's Wraiths and only a few intermittent moments with Nico.

I hope his task is going better than my own. It was, maybe, a less important role, but depending on how everything else shook out, Nico's success would still decide exactly how the next leg of this war would play out.

The elderwood guardian stirred within me suddenly, and I immediately sobered. The beast's will had been more active since we arrived in the Beast Glades, pressing on me like a tension held just beneath my skin. Tessia, on the other hand, had been largely silent, the presence of her destroyed homeland looming like a dark cloud over her thoughts.

I had expected her to give me trouble, considering. Being in Dicathen was a risk, but it never should have taken so long. Our search, however, was complicated by a number of factors. Grey's attack on the battle group in Etistin had caused a cascading failure of plans that was still rippling around me, and I had to believe that Oludari had purposely chosen that moment to seek shelter with the dragons. Combined with my continued inability to discover the exact location of the rift, it was difficult not to grow frustrated with this mission.

It should have been a straightforward thing to find the point where so much power was converging and condensing, but the transmission of mana between Dicathen and Epheotus was tremendous. The flow of mana was so great that it sent echoes of itself all over eastern Dicathen, and, to make matters worse, there also seemed to be several layers of powerful diffusive magic and shrouding spells in place throughout the Beast Glades, which I could neither explain nor breach—yet.

Closing my eyes, I rubbed the bridge of my nose with two fingers. *Focus,* I scolded myself. My eyes snapped open and I unfolded from my floating position before drifting to the ground. "No, I don't need to focus. I need a break."

Conjuring a bed of soft soil and woven plant fibers, I lay down and closed my eyes again, trying to doze as I waited for Nico and the Wraiths to return.

I sensed Nico’s mana signature ascend from one of the many dungeons he was searching some time later. Flying over the treetops with his escort of Wraiths to prevent attacks by the largest of Dicathen’s mana beasts, he was quick in returning. The Wraiths kept their distance, setting up a meager camp and lighting a fire to heat their food while Nico came to report on his mission.

He wasn’t having any more luck than I was.

“The timing of all this is starting to become a problem,” he said as he finished telling me all about the last couple of dungeons he’d searched. “The tether between Epheotus and our world, the dragon patrols, the teleportation gates…it all needs to come together just right, otherwise all the pieces collapse individually.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I snapped, then looked away from him, immediately feeling guilty. Ever since our fight against Grey, there had been a queasy tension between us. “I’m sorry, I’m just…”

He waved away my apology. “I know. I shouldn’t focus on the negative. Perhata’s group took out a dragon, we know where Oludari is, and so far, the wider operation in Dicathen seems to have gone unnoticed. We’ve got time. We…”

Something in the distance, an unusual movement within the mana, stole my attention, and Nico drifted off, clearly seeing the distraction of my features.

“Cecil?” Nico asked. “What is it?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, frowning.

The signature was similar to a mana beast’s, but it was too concentrated, and it moved too fast and too straight for any of the more powerful beasts I was familiar with. I focused on it, searching the mana. Deep within my being, a familiar aspect resonated.

“A phoenix!” I exclaimed, unable to hide my excitement. “Its mana signature is disguised somehow, more like a mana beast than an asura, but I’m certain it’s a phoenix. It must be one of Mordain’s people…” Spinning toward the Wraiths, I gestured to one of the battle groups. “You five, with me.”

Flying up into the lower, thinner bows of the canopy, I sped off in the direction of the mana signature. It was coming from the mountains and moving fast, flying just over the treetops. As we moved south and west to intercept, I carefully shrouded even the most minor distortion of the Wraiths' mana.

We flew for an hour or more before our paths converged. The Wraiths and I alighted in a tree, hiding within the deep shadows, and waited. A minute passed, and then there was the sudden rush of wind as a large man flashed past above, sending a wave of motion through the broad leaves above.

I gave a signal to the others, and we sped off in pursuit of the phoenix. Agrona would be quite pleased if this venture rewarded us with not only the location of the rift between Dicathen and Epheotus, but also that of the long-hidden refuge of Mordain and the other asuras he'd led from their homes.

Finally, something goes right, I thought, carefully ignoring the prickling of Lady Dawn's memories in the back of my head.

CHUL ASCLEPIUS

As I flew deeper over the Beast Glades and closer to the Hearth, a dozen scarlet harpies burst up from the cover of the trees to my right and scattered, their squawking slicing at my ears like razors. I stopped, frowning as they flew away. Scanning the trees below, I failed to see what had caused their unusual behavior. A coven of harpies wasn't easily cowed; they weren't fleeing from my passage, that much was certain.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose as a chill tremor ran along my spine.

Flying straight up, I spun around and bellowed, "Come out! I know you are there. If you wish for a battle, you have found one, so come out and claim it!"

I conjured Suncrusher into my hands and pushed mana through it. Orange flames simmered within the fissures, but I was careful to not let too much mana escape needlessly.

The forest below ripped itself apart.

Hundreds of shadowy, winged creatures exploded into the air, spinning around me like a dark cyclone, and from the shadows dozens of needle-thin black spikes flew toward me. I swung Suncrusher with all the speed I possessed, conjuring a gout of bright orange flames in a thin nova. Phoenix fire collided with blood iron and void wind, and the sky became an inferno.

Flames rained down on the canopy, and the forest began to burn.

Flying right, I brought my mace up and caught a blurring scythe as it slashed down, the movement so fast I only saw the big, ugly man holding it after our weapons had already collided.

Too late, I sensed the hissing cut of another weapon, and something bit into my back. I spun away from the scythe, whirling Suncrusher in an arc around me, struggling to control the flow of mana to reinforce both my weapon and the thick barrier cladding my skin. Both my attackers fell back, melting into the wall of blazing shadow creatures and flame.

The shadow creatures were closing in, their spiraling flight speeding as they did so. Putting my head down, I sped onward into the tumult, pulsing mana rapidly into my barrier in preparation for their assault. I came up against an invisible resistance—a repelling force—entwining the creatures. My entire body jerked, my force matched by that of the enclosing cyclone.

With a sound like breaking bones, the opposing spell burst asunder, and I smashed through into open air.

Two horned men waited for me on the other side, both wrapped in dark mana. One thrust forward with a spear like a black lightning bolt as the other breathed out a cloud of pure darkness.

I jerked to a halt, sending the force of my forward progress out in front of me in a controlled burst. The man with the lightning spear twirled around the wave of visible force, but the second man wasn’t ready and was batted aside, the spell spilling forth from his ugly mug clipping off before fully manifesting.

Behind the Wraiths, the force wave exploded in a series of fireballs.

Suncrusher and the black lightning bolt collided. Coiling tendrils wrapped around the haft of my weapon and up my arms, making my arms go numb.

My vision darkened as the winged shadows swarmed around me from the sides, seeking to close the loop of their cyclone again. Flying somewhere within their depths, I could sense three more signatures, indistinct and difficult to trace.

I dropped my weapon and leaned into the spear-wielder's attack, forcing the spear down and away with one arm as I drove my other elbow into the man's mouth, rocking his head back. Despite my numb arms, I spun around behind him, gripped him in my quivering fists, and hurled him bodily at his shadow-spewing companion.

Pain ripped through my side, and I looked down to see the black scythe embedded deep into my hip, the long, curved blade lodged into the bone. With a roar, I summoned Suncrusher again and slammed it against the scythe, wrenching it free of my body and nearly knocking it from the huge man's grasp. The blow continued into the man's knee, spinning him off balance. Layered beneath the physical blow, I released a bursting nova of force and fire, throwing the man further away and deflecting a barrage of blood iron spears.

The winged shadows had congealed around us again, spinning faster and faster, and all three of my attackers backed into the vortex, again melting from sight.

I considered their strength, the dark feel of their mana, and knew them to be Wraiths: the experimentations of the Vritra clan, bred by generations of controlled entwining of basilisk and Alacryan blood. A battle group of Wraiths wielding the decay-attribute magic of the basilisks.

I let out a booming laugh of surprise but held back the eager taunts that jumped to my lips. Brute force and a quick end to the fight would not be enough to win this battle. I needed to stay mindful of the lessons I had learned traveling with Arthur, and I had to make my power last.

Lifting Suncrusher above my head with one hand, I felt for the five half-hidden mana signatures around me, then reached for the atmospheric fire-attribute mana that had drifted high into the sky above the Beast Glades, basking in the warmth of the sun. When my weapon swung down, columns of fire fell with it, scorching the sky like the fingers of an ancient god.

The vortex of shadow creatures boiled away, revealing the five dark forms it had hidden. The Wraiths deflected the attack with outward ease, not bothering to dodge or hide because of its apparent lack of power. As the columns of fire faded, a haze of my mana clung to them, making each Wraith glow like a firebug.

They would find it difficult to use the shelter of their obscuring spells to hide from me now.

Pushing mana into Suncrusher, I held the mace aloft and released a flash of blinding light. Flames crackled as the weapon then carved an arc around me, firing off several bolts of phoenix flame. Mana surged from the weapon back into me, and I released it as a solid beam of force.

The spell caught the shadow-spewing Wraith in the arm as he attempted to blink away the blinding flash and dodge a much weaker bolt of fire, which exploded in the air as it passed him. His mana seethed against mine, then the skin beneath blackened and broke open.

A black spike punched through my barrier of protective mana and then through the muscle of my shoulder. A second ripped through my side, and a third my upper thigh. A quickly conjured aura of flame wrapped around me, burning away the rest of the projectiles.

Darkness took me. Like a living shadow, it wrapped around my face, covering my eyes, nose, and mouth. I clawed at the black, but my hand came away empty.

Suncrusher whirled around me defensively as I struggled for a way to free myself.

A jolt struck my left side. A biting pain sliced across my right. Tiny claws of mana raked and bit at me from every direction.

My weapon moved faster and faster as I whirled it around me, searching for the right mana signature. They had me on the defensive, having already shrugged off the most potent of my spells, and I could feel their movements slowing, their demeanor growing confident. The Wraiths’ mana signatures blinked in and out, half suppressed and muddied by the confluence of so

many spells, but they hadn’t yet shaken off the lingering haze of phoenix fire that clung to them.

Something pierced me from above, driving down through my shoulder, back, and finally into my hip before leaving my body through the back of my leg. Something flashed through the shadows, black on black, like a bolt of dark lightning, and my body spasmed.

Heedless of the pain, I focused on my target. The source of the suffocating blackness was nearby, closer than he should have been, more still, his guard down. I held my strike even as my blood pumped from my wounds.

Sagging slightly, I gave a ragged, choked breath through gritted teeth and coughed up blood.

The blackness swirled, and I felt the caster, now right in front of me, thrust his weapon casually at my throat.

I shattered the inhibiting barrier of control around my core, letting my mana flood into my weapon. In a single motion, I swept Suncrusher upward, catching the lazy thrust of a blade of blood iron wrapped in shadows and incinerating the weapon and arm alike.

My left hand, grip weak from the spike piercing my entire body, wrapped around an unseen throat, and the shadows distorted, briefly showing me the Wraith’s face, his eyes wide and horrified, his mouth open in a shadow-spewing howl of agony.

“You have fallen for my ruse,” I growled before Suncrusher passed through his skull, burnt black fragments of which sprayed out into the air as his blood-slick throat slipped free of my grip, sending the corpse tumbling toward the forest below.

The shadows melted away. The Wraith with the lightning spear hesitated as he turned to watch his companion plummet, while a long-haired woman cursed at the others to close ranks even as her conjured shadow creatures crawled all over me, their claws and teeth making tatters of my skin.

Right in front of me, the big one’s scythe was slicing down.

Releasing Suncrusher again, my right hand snapped up and grabbed the weapon just beneath the curved blade, but my left arm quaked and refused to listen. The scythe's tip carved across my collarbone and down my chest, drawing a torn and bloody line. From the corner of my eye, I could see a foot of black iron still sticking up from my shoulder, its length pinning my whole body together like an insect on a mat.

I jerked the scythe toward me, and the big Wraith was yanked forward with it. I drove my forehead into the bridge of his nose, then exploded into an aura of flames once against, sending the Wraith flailing away as his weapon burned in my grip.

The shadow beasts burned off my body. A bolt of black lightning deflected and arced away.

With a twist of my hips and shoulders, I shattered the blood iron spear piercing me, and it oozed from my wounds alongside my own blood.

The next wave of attacks came too fast for me even to lock down my enemies' locations, and, despite my best efforts to conserve it, I could already feel my mana faltering. Pushing toward the Wraiths, I took advantage of the gap in their number to force them on the defensive. There was no time to slow down or come up with some plan of attack. My thoughts grew slow and cloudy, unable to keep up with the four powerful enemies, and the lessons of my training bled from me.

Fire and blows rained down in the direction of whichever Wraith was closest, but the conjurer's shadowy summons were everywhere, crawling over me, flying between me and my target, and although I pushed them back and prevented them from coordinating their assault, I did little enough damage of my own.

The aura of fire faded far too soon. Though my many wounds were of no importance, my core itself ached as if a fist of iron were crushing it.

I kept myself from glancing in the direction of the Hearth. The Wraiths had been shadowing me and hadn't attacked until I discovered their presence. It wasn't me for which they hunted. It was home.

I grinned viciously and spat out a mouthful of blood. “I have taken a life today, while you have only managed to shed a few drops of blood. Keep running and you will all join the fallen!”

The lightning bolt spear flashed toward me. I batted it aside. A large blood iron lance thrust out of a passing shadow at my throat. I caught it on Suncrusher, shattering it. Gouts of uncontrolled flame leapt from my body and weapon, burning away the shadow summons but only hastening the depletion of my mana.

A frigid numbness clutched the left side of my body. I stared down at it, not immediately comprehending.

Blood drained from me in a curtain, chasing the tumbling arm and leg that had just been severed from me, pumping furiously out of the remaining stumps. I thought I could still see the afterimage of the black scythe in the air where it had swept through me, parting me from my limbs.

I wobbled, nearly falling out of the sky, my flight interrupted by the bitter shock attempting to seize my mind.

“Bah,” I spat again, waving Suncrusher before me, the fissures glowing bright orange as air rushed through them. “One arm is enough, it is all I ever needed, I—”

A ring of blood iron spikes grew from the winged shadows, hovering around me. Black lightning struck them, chaining the spikes together so that they formed a solid barrier. Beyond it, the scythe-wielding giant floated into view. He was burned and favoring one side even in flight, but his face was unmarred by the expression of pain. Instead, he was grinning.

“You seem eager to die, asura. Would that I could give you that gift, but such is not my place today.” His rasping voice tightened with excitement as he continued. “But how much pain you experience, that depends on how long you keep up this meaningless conflict.”

Flames blazed across my wounds, scorching my flesh and sealing them, filling the air with the scent of hot iron as my blood boiled. “Do not think you can cow me with these small words. Even your cruel kind has not invented a pain that can break me. Either I will leave here victorious and

your ashes will fertilize the forest below, or I will die a warrior’s death and my companions will bring down a mighty vengeance in recompense.”

The Wraith scoffed and exchanged a look with the summoner. She tossed her long hair and shrugged.

“Then we will take the rest of your limbs, one by one,” the Wraith continued.

He gave a signal with his hand, and the web of iron and lightning began closing in on me. I knew my strength was flagging, but I had enough yet to use one arm at least.

Pushing as much mana as my complaining core would allow into my weapon, I swung with all my might. Flames jumped and curled from the fissures, creating halos of white fire around the round head and leaving a tail of sparks in its wake.

Suncrusher met the combined black lightning and blood iron net.

Phoenix fire raged against the decay-attribute mana of the Wraiths. Blood iron twisted and the soulfire deviant lightning splintered. Energy ripped apart at the seams, fracturing outward in the form of mana shrapnel, the ruptured spells crashing over the Wraiths like a tide of consuming death.

The scythe-wielding Wraith reared back even as my momentum carried me through the shroud of shattered mana, my weapon aimed at his head. His scythe came up, but too slow. Shadows pulled at my arm, hardened between us, and pulled the Wraith away simultaneously, but the pure white light of my fire cast them aside.

At the last second, the Wraith dipped down, and Suncrusher collided with the side of one horn, shearing it from his head.

Moving with its own hungry lust for enemy blood, Suncrusher swept around again, falling toward the Wraith’s skull while shadow and iron crashed all around me, then…

The light darkened. The weapon slid free of my limp grasp, whirling end over end into the burning trees below. The fire in my core went out, and I began to fall as backlash took me.

31

LADY DAWN'S CHILD

CECILIA

As I watched the phoenix slump, his core overdrawn, backlash ripping him from consciousness, a memory that wasn’t my own blistered up in my mind: a boy running and laughing, his mismatched eyes—one burning orange, the other icy blue—sparkling with joy and wonder. Now those same mismatched eyes rolled back into his head as he tumbled into freefall.

I was looking at Lady Dawn’s child, there was no doubt. The taste of her mana lingered in my senses, creating a sort of resonance with his own. I could *feel* their connection, was now a part of it, like there were two magnets linking us.

Along with the connection came emotions that also weren’t mine: protectiveness, despair, and a bright, blistering fury.

Not my emotions. I thought bitterly of all the alien thoughts, memories, and ideas that had been stuffed into my head since being reincarnated. *This isn’t someone I care about.*

Taking a firm hold of the surging motherly instincts, I tamped them down, burying them.

Khoriax swung low and grabbed the unconscious phoenix by the back of his clothes. He shot a questioning look at me where I was hidden among the smoldering branches of a broad-leafed tree. I opened my mouth to speak, but before the words left me, the world erupted into fiery hell.

The flames started by the battle roared into the sky, painting the Beast Glades in a red that burned like a falling sun. The air scorched my lungs, combusting into smoke and fire. My clothes smoldered and little flames licked up from the protective barrier of mana shrouding my body. Even my senses seemed to burn beneath the swelling mana, as if I were staring at the sun.

Reaching out, I took hold of the mana and tried to smother it…but the will controlling it resisted, driving me back.

“But…how? Who?” I gasped out loud, astounded.

A man descended into the inferno. The sudden roaring wind seemed to barely ruffle his hair, just as the smoke failed to blind his yellow eyes.

The four surviving Wraiths all faced the man, but they were having an even more difficult time resisting the effects of the spell. They exchanged uncertain looks and threw searching glances down into the trees in my direction.

“Servants of Agrona.” The reverberation of the man’s voice suddenly told me who he was, his identity contained within the memories shared by Lady Dawn. “Your hostility within my own domain will not be tolerated. This place and everyone within it are under my protection,” Mordain of the Asclepius clan said firmly. “You test my sworn neutrality by attacking here. Give me this member of my clan and go.”

Khoriax’s scythe reformed in his hands, and he pressed the blade against Chul’s throat. “It seems to be showering phoenixes on us today. How convenient. Stop channeling this cursed spell and give yourself up, or I open this boy’s throat and—”

Huge talons of fire manifested from the heat searing the atmosphere to wrap around Khoriax. The claws burned through his mana and flesh alike,

rending him into charred meat before he could even shout out. The half-phoenix slumped into the claw, unharmed.

I was still hidden, my control of mana ensuring that I would be unsensible even to one so powerful as this man. I worried the Wraiths might give me away, but the remaining three kept their focus on Mordain, their defenses up but making no move to attack.

Suddenly the tree in which I hid was engulfed in a fire I could neither control nor sustain. Reacting instinctively, I leapt into the air and flew free of the flames, my skin red and sore even beneath my protective mana.

“The Legacy…” Mordain said. His bright yellow eyes were locked on me, his robes billowing around him and melding into the smoke. “Even you cannot hide from me within my own domain spell. Do not test your limits against my patience here.”

My mind reeled. I didn’t know what to do. This phoenix was powerful, his grip over mana ironclad. Dragons still swarmed over the Beast Glades, so even if I did defeat him, could I do it fast enough to return to my task without drawing their attention?

It’s not worth the risk, I told myself, hoping I was acting logically, as Agrona would, and not out of fear.

“Wraiths, with me—”

Suddenly, my body went rigid as a force inside of me thrust itself against my control. My hand raised of its own accord, snapping forward and releasing a whiplike vine that had coiled around my wrist.

The whip carved across the space between Mordain and me, a green crescent that seemed to be moving in slow motion. The tip of the vine burst into flames, which raced along its surface, blackening the emerald green of its flesh.

The whip blew away to ash just short of Mordain’s throat.

His expression twitched slightly, but he did not move to counter, hesitation leaking onto his face for a split second.

Clenching my teeth until they creaked, I forced my body back into submission, breaking the momentary loss of control, then spun away and flew at all speed, bursting out of the domain spell's shell and back into blue sky and cool wind.

What in the Vritra's name were you trying to do? I snarled inside my own head.

Tessia didn't immediately answer, and I hurried to put distance between Mordain and myself. The three Wraiths fell in behind me, pushing to their limit to keep up.

Looking over my shoulder, I realized Mordain's domain spell was a sphere wrapping everything within it in pure fire-attribute mana. Within that sphere, his own mana pushed out all the atmospheric mana, amplifying his spells and control while diminishing that of his enemies.

You thought he could beat us—kill us, didn't you? Inside that hellish terrain he created. Make up your mind, would you? Really, do you want to live or die? Do you even know?

'No, I don't want to die,' Tessia said softly, her first words to me since entering Dicathen. *'But I can't help but wonder if I'm a coward not to try harder to make that happen. To hurt Agrona and keep everyone safe—Arthur safe—you need to die.'*

I stopped suddenly, a shiver running down my spine.

Mordain's domain spell collapsed. For a moment, the presence of both asuras was crystal clear, then the atmospheric mana seemed to swallow their signatures as Mordain shrouded himself and Chul from me.

And yet…something was still there. I had no sense of their mana signatures, but…the resonance I now felt with Chul couldn't be so easily disguised.

Gathering my own mana, I pushed out a condensed sphere and sent it hurtling forward at about the same speed I'd been flying. "Follow as long as the spell lasts, then return to the others and resume your hunt."

The three Wraiths gave me similar looks of confusion. When I waved them on, their hesitation broke and they sped away, following the miniature sun

now rushing over the forest's canopy.

Drifting down under the cover of the trees, I began slowly moving back toward where the Wraiths had fought against Chul. The wind carried the smell of smoke and burning, and there was a consistent flow of atmospheric mana back into the void left behind by the domain spell.

Anger welled up inside me: anger at myself for having to run away from Mordain, and for allowing Tessia to take control.

If it was your goal to kill us both, you should have let me die during my Integration, I seethed to the elf as I searched for the resonance.

'Was it easy for you? When you killed yourself on Grey's sword?' she responded, her voice laced with bitterness and regret.

I chewed the inside of my cheek, careful to keep my mana in check for fear of Mordain sensing me. *I still did it, didn't I?*

'Yes, you did. But you did it to escape, to run away from what you couldn't handle.' A beat of silence lingered before she spoke again, her thoughts growing more confident. *'I didn't want to die then, and I don't want to die now. But I'm trying to do what I can to help, to fight back. Unlike you.'*

Just because you know my memories does not mean you know what I went through, I snapped, pausing my pursuit. *You have no idea what I've had to endure…or what I'm willing to do to make sure Nico and I get the life that we deserve.*

With newfound resolve, I took a moment to align my mana signature with the ambient mana around me and resumed tailing Chul, letting the slight pull from his core guide me. I moved forward carefully, quietly flitting through the lower network of branches, my entire consciousness focused on that small tug in the distance.

Suddenly, the connection with Chul's mana was completely severed. I felt a spike of fear as adrenaline surged through me, and I increased my speed, aiming for the last place I had felt him. My thoughts started to knot themselves into a jumble, but I tried to let my mind go blank again, remembering only the sense of where that tug had been before it was blocked.

I slowed as I got close to where I thought I'd lost the sense of it and settled down into the roots of a giant, silver-barked charwood tree.

It has to be nearby, I thought, almost hoping for a reluctant confirmation from Tessia.

The entire Beast Glades were ringing with the echo of all that mana pouring between Epheotus and Dicathen, but there were multiple sources of shrouding magic at work in the glades as well. Now, so close, I could feel the edges of such a spell, or rather, many layers of the spell. It was subtle, nearly undetectable by design. But I could *see* the mana, feel the way the shrouding spell pressed against the atmospheric motes, taste the complex compression, smell the hint of that unique attribute that made phoenix mana different.

Mordain's spell was powerful; it had to be. He'd been hiding his people from Agrona Vritra and Kezess Indrath for centuries. But what mattered more than power was control, and mine was greater than either of theirs.

I closed my eyes and steadied my breathing. My own mana was perfectly in equilibrium with the atmosphere, hiding me from anyone who might, in turn, be searching for me. The charwood was rough and cool against my back. The rich, smoky scent of its leaves reminded me of brewing tea. Mana-laden wind sent ripples through its leaves, which rubbed against each other with overlapping echoes of soft scratching.

The tree was breathing. I could feel its life, its energy. Limbs lifted high, high into the air, spreading and seeking the sun and mana, while the roots dug deep down into the soil. It was almost beautiful how the tree took in sun, water, and atmospheric mana and, even without a core, purified that mana into something else, something new, a plant-attribute deviant form uniquely its own.

That mana spread throughout it, leaching into the soil, mingling with the earth-attribute mana and giving it life and energy. I could sense it in every twig, leaf, and root. And the roots of this charwood, along with all the others in this part of the Beast Glades, seemed to grow at an angle, as if they were drawn toward something. They didn't spread out evenly but were pulled in one direction, diving down deeper than any other trees nearby.

I let my senses trickle down, following the deviant mana into the roots. They spread and entwined, and I felt the shrouding spells move past me like a parting veil as I followed, blind to everything except the plant-attribute mana. As my consciousness moved beyond the layers of shielding, I suddenly felt again the specific mana signatures of Mordain and Chul—and many others besides.

A smirk tugged at my lips as I wiped away a bead of sweat threatening to roll into my eye.

Do you see now? It was inevitable from the start. Your purpose, your fate, was to be the vessel for my reincarnation, I thought smugly.

'If that's the case, I look forward to seeing what fate awaits you, a coward too afraid to even see the truth: that you're nothing more than a weapon, a tool for destruction,' Tessia replied, her voice unbearably pitying. *'If what you hope for ever does come true, I assure you it won't be earned through victory. It will be out of mercy.'*

My fists clenched as every fiber of my being wanted nothing more than to snuff her presence out of my mind like a candle, but the hold I had on the mana past Mordain's shielding threatened to come loose.

I turned my focus back to the task at hand, letting my mana permeate through the roots within the carved walls of the phoenixes' sanctuary, edging carefully forward like walking on a tightrope until—

"—need to agitate his core, encourage it to draw in the mana. Stoke the fires, and bring me mana crystals and elixirs. Everything we have!"

It was Mordain's voice. Tight with an edge of panic, no longer the controlled storm of power that he had shown me before. A dozen other conversations vibrated into the soil and the roots of the charwood trees, but I blocked them all out, focusing solely on Mordain.

"He's too far gone," another voice said, slightly reedy and hesitant. "His core is barely drawing mana, and his missing limbs—"

"Thank you, Avier," Mordain said firmly, cutting off the second voice.

MORDAIN ASCLEPIUS

Avier settled back onto his roost to watch in silence, his feathers ruffling slightly, but I could not afford to give him any more attention. There would be time for kindness and apologies later. After…

Mana poured from my hands, heat rippling through the air between Chul and myself. Soleil and Aurora, two of my clan members, copied me, their mana joining mine as we sought to agitate Chul's core, but although his skin reddened under the heat, his core itself remained dull and dormant.

He was no longer processing mana. Even sleeping or unconscious, his core should have continued to draw in and purify mana to support his physical body. But he had put himself deeply into backlash while his body was in a state of near death. Too much of his mana had gone into supporting and healing himself, and there was none left to heal the resulting strain on his core. Like a heart that has stopped beating, we had to find a way to get his mana flowing again; otherwise…

Glancing around the room, I tried to remember the lessons of my youth. It had been too long since I had been needed to heal the wounds of battle.

A single bed was set in the middle of a small chamber in the Hearth's central nest. Due to our exertions and a rousing fire in the fireplace, it had become blisteringly hot. I stood to one side of Chul's bed while my two clan members stood at Chul's feet and head respectively. Avier roosted atop a shelf affixed to the wall in his green owl form, his large eyes following our every movement.

Chul lay unconscious on the bed between us. The last of his mana had gone toward burning his own wounds closed, so there was little blood, but the sight of him so ripped and torn, with his leg and arm missing, was enough to make my old heart squeeze painfully. When I let him go into this battle with Arthur, I had never envisioned him returning to us like this.

I should have been more cautious, I thought tiredly. There was more at stake than the life of one clan member. I needed Chul, needed to understand what he'd seen and experienced since leaving the Hearth. He was my eyes in the world to see its current shape, the dowsing rod with which I would find the truth of the events unfolding across both continents.

I closed my eyes and let out an old man's heartfelt sigh.

“Hello again, Arthur,” Avier said, and my eyes snapped open.

Arthur Leywin was standing in the entrance, staring aghast at Chul’s prone form. I hadn’t felt him enter the Hearth. Hiding my surprise, I welcomed him. “What trick of fate brings you here at this moment?” I asked, watching him closely for any sign of his intentions.

“What happened?” he asked, outwardly bewildered.

“I…” Words failed me, and my composure cracked, my intention to hide the deep pain I felt at my own failure slipping as my facial features trembled. “I had to recall Chul to the Hearth, but I was unaware of the Legacy’s presence within the Beast Glades. She attacked him with a group of basilisk lessurans—Wraiths, I believe they call themselves. You…are here just in time to wish Chul farewell. I cannot save him.” Even as I said the words, I understood them to be true. There was nothing else I could do for Dawn’s child.

“Why did you—wait…” Arthur seemed to struggle for a moment to make sense of what I’d said. “What do you mean, you can’t save him? These wounds look bad, sure, but he’s an asura…or at least half. He’s—” He suddenly went quiet, his gaze looking right through Chul.

I knew what he was seeing. “His body is too weak and injured to sustain itself. With so little mana, not only is he horribly wounded, but his body is starving as it tries to heal. We have been unable to alter the state of his core, and no elixir we have used has been properly absorbed.”

“The imbalance between the strength of his physique and his core,” Arthur said softly. His brows pinched together, and he gave me a fierce glare. “You said the Legacy. She did this?”

I rested my hand on Chul’s burning forehead, remembering the feeling of her will battering against my own. Knowing now was not the time for the full story, I only nodded.

Arthur moved closer to the table. His hands were clenched into white-knuckled fists at his sides. “He shouldn’t have been alone. He was supposed to be in Vildorial with my sister.” His eyes lit up as he had a sudden,

desperate thought. “Ellie! She can manipulate mana, push it directly into a core. Maybe she can…”

I nodded along, already knowing what he intended to suggest. “Although it is unlikely to stimulate a core so weakened and unresponsive, I would try it gladly—I would try anything, but…there is simply no time, Arthur. By the time we can bring her from Vildorial, Chul will be…”

“You have to have some way to—you’re *phoenixes*, damn it,” Arthur snapped, his glare sharpening into genuine anger. “Why the hell did you send him out there alone, Mordain? What were you thinking?”

I knew he was speaking from fear and frustration for his friend, and I did not take his words to heart, accepting their weight and feeling no bitterness toward him. When I spoke, I took care with each word, not wishing to cause him further pain in that moment. “I thought the need was great, Arthur, but you are right to be upset with me. It was my own impatience that brought Chul into the open.” *And I feel your frustration will only grow as you learn everything*.

“The other asura,” Arthur said suddenly, jumping to a different trail of thought. “Surely the dragons—Kezess—would have magic capable of healing even these wounds, right?”

I couldn’t help the sorrowful expression that settled on my features. “Perhaps. The dragons’ vivum arts can be quite potent, but when an asura can no longer absorb mana, there is little even the most powerful healing spells or elixirs can accomplish. Backlash in an asura is rare, Arthur. We have sufficient mana in our cores to prevent it in all but the most dire situations.”

“There has to be something,” Arthur said, running his hand through his hair, his eyes wild. “Maybe…” He did something, some magic with his aether that I couldn’t sense, and then began spilling items out on the bed beside Chul. “I have elixirs, all kinds of things I’ve picked up in my travels, just in case. Here, go through it all. This?” He held up a small vial of rich, plum-colored liquid. “Or these?” Spread out on the mattress were three faded green scales, each the size of a clam shell.

Soleil leaned forward, staring wide-eyed from the pile of treasures to Arthur, then to me. Arthur gave her a hopeful look.

Moving around the table to stand at his side, I scooped up the artifacts and held them out. “It’s just not enough. Not nearly enough, but you know that already.”

He seemed to deflate, taking the objects and making them vanish again into some sort of dimensional storage. He searched my eyes, but for what I couldn’t be sure. Some meaning in Chul’s death, perhaps? Or the truth… and thinking that, I realized something.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, hoping my voice sounded kind. “You could not have known about Chul, so why did you come?”

He waved the question away. “Does that really matter right now? It’s… important, but first we need to…to—” His eyes widened yet again, and again he activated his dimensional storage. “Elixirs! I’d nearly forgotten that he called them powerful elixirs.”

I felt my brows inch up. “He? What elixirs? Arthur, I—”

A gasp burst out of me before I could help it as I stared down at the three objects held loosely in his hand. Moving quickly but carefully, I wrapped both my own hands around his and gently pressed his fingers so they closed firmly around the three bright blue pearls.

“Careful, Arthur, careful!” His expression was thoughtful as he took in my reaction, like he was weighing it in his mind. “Do you know the value of what you carry?”

Arthur returned my uncertain gaze with a clarity and purpose that surprised me, even coming from one such as him. “When I attempted to give these away before, an asuran lord refused to take them because they were too valuable to accept. I’m not a fool, Mordain, I know how precious these mourning pearls must be, but all I care about right now is whether or not they will help him.”

“What are they?” Avier asked curiously, his head turning sideways.

Soleil and Aurora were also looking at me without understanding. Young, so young, all of them, I thought, saddened that those in my place no longer knew the Tears of the Mother…and yet hesitant to tell any of them the story.

Glancing at Chul, I could see what little mana was still lingering in his body burning away rapidly. It would only be right to tell Arthur everything before accepting one on Chul's behalf. The weight of his sacrifice should not be done out of ignorance, but…

I swallowed heavily, searching Arthur's eyes for the truth of his intention.

Finally, I nodded and took a single pearl between two fingers, lightly easing it out of Arthur's palm. "I believe it will, although I have not seen one used in many, many years." My focus switched to Soleil. "Go, find me the sharpest silver knife. Quickly!"

Arthur stepped forward and leaned over Chul, and a blade of vibrant amethyst power condensed into his hand in the shape of a dagger. "I'll do it. Just tell me what needs to be done."

I dragged my finger along the burning skin of Chul's chest, above his sternum. "We need to cut down into his core. Open the core itself wide enough to insert the pearl."

There was no surprise or hesitation in his mannerisms. Instead, he rested one hand on Chul's chest as the other guided his conjured blade gracefully along the crease above Chul's sternum. The amethyst blade parted flesh, bone, and even the toughened exterior of the core as simply as if it were slicing bread. It took only a single pass.

Moving so slow it felt almost painful, I eased the bright blue sphere down beneath Chul's skin and into the core itself. I stepped quickly away, and Soleil and Aurora did the same.

Arthur belatedly copied us, his gaze moving back and forth between me and the wound in Chul's sternum. "Is it working?"

"We will know in a moment. Until then, all we can do is wait."

Silence lingered as we all watched, equally uncertain what the result would be. Peace and calm settled into the deep-rooted tension, helping to break it apart. Everything that could be done had been, and now all we could do was wait.

“You said…Cecilia did this?” Arthur asked after a minute or more.

“Her soldiers did,” I explained, feeling an edge of anger invade the peace of the moment. “She stayed hidden. I believe it was her goal that no one would discover her presence in Dicathen.” I hesitated. “There was something…strange about the encounter. She…attacked me, but it was a feeble effort, and she seemed caught off guard by her own attempt. Then she fled.”

Arthur was silent and contemplative, but he didn’t respond.

I considered everything that had happened, the unlikeliness of it all, from the Legacy’s presence to Arthur’s arrival with the mourning pearls. “Tell me, Arthur…I need to know how you came to have these mourning pearls. Did you steal them? Take them by force? Did someone offer them to you in trade? If—”

He looked surprised and affronted, glancing at the other phoenixes and Avier. “No! Veruhn—Lord Eccleiah gave them to me. I assumed they were a gift to be given to the Matali clan, but they refused them.”

“I see,” I said, not meaning to interrupt him. “Lord Eccleiah…I won’t pretend to have insight into his thoughts. To have gifted you not one but *three* such things, and without even explaining what they were…” I shook my head, hardly believing it. “Veruhn is playing a dangerous game. I am surprised Kezess even allowed you to leave Epheotus with these. Things are happening that I do not understand.”

“My lord Mordain,” Aurora said in her small voice. When I looked in her direction, she continued. “What makes these…mourning pearls? What makes them so valuable?”

“Tears of the Mother…a leviathan ritual.” I gestured to Arthur, and he held up the other two. “One created in a thousand years, perhaps less. It is exceedingly rare for an asura to die in infancy, before even being hatched. An unbelievable tragedy.” My throat grew raw, my voice husky. “The

leviathans…long ago they discovered a process by which…they break down the body of the infant but maintain its core.

“Held within an immature leviathan core, all the mana that should form and build a new life, sustaining an infant while they learn to manipulate mana for themselves. A life. That is what each pearl holds. A new life.”

“I don’t understand what that means,” Arthur said, his voice soft.

“Mourning pearls are the greatest gift the lord of the leviathan race can offer. He bestows them only rarely, and only to ease the great suffering of a life that must be lived, do you understand?” I felt my mouth curving down into a deeper and deeper frown with each word. “The history of Epheotus is rich with tales of princes, kings, prophets, and great heroes who were saved from certain death by a mourning pearl. But each one is bought with a life unlived, an infant who could not be saved. It is never a trade made lightly.”

“Three thousand years of mourning pearls…” Arthur muttered. He rolled them around gently, then made them vanish back into his dimensional storage, and I thought perhaps he was beginning to understand the weight of his decision. He gave himself a little shake. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t know—yet—what Lord Eccleiah wants that he would give me these, but regardless of their value, if it can save this battle-hungry simpleton from…”

He trailed off as blue light reflected in his golden eyes. Mana was beginning to flow from the mourning pearl. It was only a trickle at first, and then a stream. Within moments, a river of mana poured forth.

Blue-white light, so bright I had to look away, glowed from the cut in Chul’s chest. It spilled out of him, boiling over his flesh before being absorbed back in through his many wounds, enveloping him in a liquid light of pure mana. His wounds closed, wiped away as if they’d been nothing more than smears of blood on his skin, and then, slowly, his missing arm and leg began to regenerate.

I could hardly believe it. The mana of a birth, a life—a rebirth. I knew Chul would be changed, but I couldn’t be sure how. Rejuvenated not just from these wounds, but from a lifetime of growth and wear.

“I didn’t sense it…” Arthur whispered. “How could so much mana be hidden in that?”

On the bed between us, Chul’s chest expanded slowly as he took a deep breath. The tension eased from his face, and the shroud of mana began to dim as it subsided back into his flesh, filling him once again.

“His core is…fixed,” Arthur said, his voice strained.

My gaze flicked to his face, which was torn with conflicting emotions. His fingers dug into his own sternum, pressing hard enough to whiten his knuckles, and I understood.

He cleared his throat and patted Chul’s arm softly. “I’ve done what I can, my brother in vengeance. The rest is up to you now.”

32

KING’S GAMBIT

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Mordain’s story had conjured a discomforting melancholy that sat like a stone in my stomach. My interaction with Lord Eccleiah had been odd from its first moments to the last, and I still couldn’t make much of everything that he’d said and done, especially knowing this new context. It was clear the old asura wanted something from me, but what exchange would be worth the cost of the mourning tears?

Theories ran rampant through my thoughts, but I had no way to confirm them, or even the inclination. Despite the knowledge that some potentially world-shifting game of asuran politics—with me at its center—was happening back in Epheotus, I had immediate concerns requiring consideration right here in Dicathen.

The news that Cecilia was here was unwelcome. Anything she was involved in was likely to be large-scale enough to change the face of the war, but that wasn’t the only reason I was uncomfortable. I didn’t relish the thought of a battle between the Legacy and the dragons, and I wasn’t sure which outcome I feared more: that Cecilia would prove strong enough to kill even full-blooded asuran warriors or that she would fall and Tessia would be destroyed with her.

It felt dangerous not to seek her out immediately, but without gaining insight into Fate, I was unsure how a second battle would prove different than the first.

“Come, Arthur, let us leave Chul to rest and complete his recovery,” Mordain said, patting the unconscious Chul’s hair in a grandfatherly sort of way. “Avier, would you do me the kindness of watching over him until he wakes?”

The green owl bobbed his horned head. “Of course.”

Mordain thanked and dismissed the other two phoenixes before leading me out of the small room. With one last look at Chul, whose body was now swimming with mana, I followed.

Mordain led us downward, walking along the bottom of the broad tunnels, which were clearly designed for flight. We left behind the central nest and entered into smaller, older tunnels, and I realized he was taking me along the same path we’d used to reach the broken Relictombs portal before. Several minutes later, we once again entered the moss-carpeted cave, illuminated by glowing crystals that grew like stalactites down from the ceiling. Unlike before, no portal glowed within the rectangular stone frame in the center of the cave, the aetheric magic having faded.

“What are we doing here?” I finally asked as Mordain knelt down and brushed his fingers over the green and gold moss.

“Speaking where we won’t be overheard,” Mordain said simply. Turning to face me, he eased himself down onto the moss, a strangely mundane action and posture for one so old and inhuman. “You have just come from Epheotus. I can still feel the energy clinging to you.”

Leaning against the cave wall, I crossed my arms and examined Mordain closely. “I did.”

“With so much facing you, you’ve returned from Epheotus and chosen to come straight to me. Fortuitous as it was, I can see only one reason for you to do so,” he said, speaking slowly. “You know I have the keystone.”

I felt my eyes widen, unable to keep the surprise from my face. “So you admit it, then? One of the rebel djinn stole the third keystone and gave it to

you?”

Mordain seemed to age before my eyes as he stared into some haunting vision of his past. “Some very few djinn thought they could change the fate of their civilization. Even among those who sought sanctuary with my people, this opinion was rare. The Relictombs wasn’t only a grand library holding all the collected knowledge of the djinn, but it contained pieces of aetheric knowledge that, when solved like a puzzle, could allow insight into influencing fate itself. The djinn, collectively, stored this knowledge in the hope that someone would eventually come along capable of using it in a way that they were not, but those who sought to fight back were ready to attempt the feat themselves, even if it killed them.

“I tried to talk them out of it, preaching the wisdom of their collective, but having cast aside their kin even in the effort to save them, they were not willing to hear such a thing, even from me. But, as more of them went into the Relictombs and failed to return, their quest became darker and more desperate.”

Mordain paused his story, his eyes fluttering closed as if they pained him. “They intended to use this hidden power to sever this world’s connection with Epheotus in order to end the genocide.”

“Would that have worked?” I asked, my own mind turning for the first time to exactly how one might use the aspect of Fate to solve the many problems now facing me.

Mordain’s eyes opened, flashing with anger. I instinctively backed away from him, but the emotion was smothered as quickly as it appeared, and he let out a long, weary sigh. “Epheotus was once a piece of this world, and in a very real way, it still is. If the…bubble surrounding it were to be cut off from this world, Epheotus would slowly starve of mana. The world asurakind has built for themselves would crumble and fade, and eventually the walls separating it from the dimension in which it is housed would wear thin. I do not think I need to extrapolate on what would happen then.”

I swallowed heavily, understanding why this would be a sore subject for the phoenix. “It would have been an entirely different type of genocide. And you couldn’t allow that.”

“No, I could not,” he said, his demeanor simultaneously tense and melancholy. “When they succeeded in claiming this keystone, I destroyed their way into the Relictombs—the same portal, ironically, that you later repaired. Those who were set on their path left, deciding our goals no longer aligned, but most stayed and lived out the rest of their lives here in peace. Like Chul’s father.”

I considered the fiery-tempered warrior, born to two representatives of peaceful people. He was so different than any of the other members of the Asclepius clan. Or the djinn I had seen, for that matter. “Does he get his temperament from his mother or father?” I asked, suddenly suspicious of something.

Mordain’s mouth quirked up in a wry smile. “Both. Such a pairing. It was exactly that internal fire that brought them together, I think. Dawn was a great warrior. She would have preferred, I think, that our entire clan perish in glorious battle against the Indraths, but she was equally loyal, and when I decided to take all who would come and leave Epheotus, she was also the first in line behind me. And Chul’s father…he was not exactly an ordinary member of the djinn race.”

“It was Chul’s father who took the keystone, wasn’t it?”

Mordain seemed unsurprised by my guess. “It was.”

“But he didn’t leave when the others did?”

Mordain was thoughtful for several long moments. “I convinced him there was more to live for than the growing darkness within his companions. It very nearly came to violence when he decided to stay and keep the keystone, but Dawn…convinced the others that such an action would be unwise.”

“Did he ever solve the keystone?”

Mordain answered with a small shake of his head, and we lapsed into silence. My thoughts were stubbornly quiet; I felt like a child being read a bedtime story, half asleep and no longer able to fully follow what was happening.

Giving myself a little shake, I tried to force myself to be present in the moment as I looked hard into Mordain's eyes. "You knew I was looking for the keystones, and you've had one this entire time. Why keep it from me?"

His expression didn't change as he mulled over my question. "It is no easy thing, to give a person—any one person—the ability to rewrite the truth of power in this world. How could any one being hold in their hands the key to fate and not succumb to the inevitable corruption of such a thing? I thought then that it was better that the keystones were never solved, and I'm unsure that my opinion has changed overmuch, but…"

He sat up straight and gave me a serious look. "Two worlds at least are caught between the machinations of Kezess and Agrona. I have started to believe that a change in the balance of power is exactly what this world needs, and yet…"

I couldn't help the wry smile that crossed my face. "How can you know if I'm really the one who should wield this power?"

"How indeed," Mordain mused, his eyes drifting to the portal frame. "That is, in part, why I allowed Chul to accompany you. He is a pure spirit, passionate but at times almost…childlike. I thought, if any would see through to the heart of you, it would be Chul. He didn't know," he added quickly. "I didn't send him to spy on you, only to get to know you. Through his eyes, I wanted to see who you really are, Arthur Leywin. And…now I have."

I waited for him to continue, unsurprised by what he had to say about Chul but curious as to where this was going.

"You came to me this day with matters of world-altering importance on your shoulders, and yet, despite not knowing Chul for long, you put all other concerns behind you and had a thought only for him, offering up anything and everything available to you in order to save him without hesitation, even an artifact of quite incalculable wealth." Mordain's voice grew slightly husky, and he paused. "Feeling the conflict between the Wraiths and dragons, I knew things were escalating. It suddenly seemed urgent to speak with Chul, to look into his eyes and understand the truth of

his experience. Because only someone equally focused and selfless has a chance to touch fate itself and not succumb to the internal desire for power.

“Yet even in that we can see the workings of fate, for if I hadn’t called upon Chul, this attack would not have occurred, and you, Arthur, could not have proven yourself. In turn, I may not have carried enough trust for you to give up the keystone…and in that, I see the proof I need. Fate itself seems to want *you* to find it, Arthur. But before I can, in good conscience, contribute to your success in this quest, I must know one thing: what will you do with the power, if you can claim it?”

I pulled away from the wall and approached Mordain, sinking down into a cross-legged position at his feet. He shifted his own posture, mirroring me.

“How can I possibly answer that question?” I asked, my voice steady, my mind clear. “To tell you what I will do with the aspect of Fate would be to understand it, but I don’t. I can’t make a judgment until I gain the insight these keystones are leading me toward.” I held Mordain’s gaze firmly, as if I were the ancient and he was hanging on my every word. “You ask too much, and in doing so you condemn the world to fall either to the vision of Kezess Indrath or Agrona Vritra. Your fear has paralyzed you, and so instead of taking a risk and failing, you would choose to fail without trying. That’s the cost of choosing to be passive in a war where loss means the end of everything.”

Mordain’s gaze fell to the gold and green moss between us. Absently, his fingers brushed across the rough surface. Then, unexpectedly, he gave a small laugh. “You offer insults when it would behoove you to be political, even if you have to invent your reasoning. A less honest man would claim to work for peace and the prosperity of all or some other calculated but weightless claim. But you…you speak your own truth, and you speak wisely. I have held myself apart for too long. I will not fight this battle for you, Arthur, but I will no longer stand in your way. You may take the keystone.”

He waved his hand, and mana scooped away the ground at the portal’s base. Unsure what to expect, I was nonetheless surprised as the mana unearthed a skeleton buried several feet beneath the stone rectangle. There was a blue tint to the bones, identifying them as something other than human.

A dark matte cube identical to the other keystones floated gently free of the skeleton's clutching fingers and out of the hole, then the soil settled back in on the hidden grave, and the keystone drifted into my hands.

Despite the weight of it, the cool, slightly rough surface, I was wary. Despite everything, obtaining the very item that I had spent so much time looking for this easily…I needed to make sure.

With a probing tendril of aether, I imbued the cuboid relic.

My mind lurched into the keystone, soaring down and into the expected veil of violet energy. I leaned into it, pushing through the wall until I manifested on the other side. Inside the keystone realm, I found myself surrounded by…I wasn't entirely sure what.

They looked like scratches in the air, aetheric score marks that burned around the edges. Each one was different, the scratches intersecting like runes, but when I focused my attention on one, it would melt away, revealing even more at the edges of my vision.

My disembodied conscious mind spun around, revealing that the keystone realm was full of these aetheric markings, but everywhere I focused, they vanished, while those on the periphery glowed even more brightly.

Pausing, I took a moment to let my mind settle into place, actively allowing it to unfocus. Looking without looking, I searched the markings around the outer limits of my visible space for meaning. I struggled at first, unable to bring them into focus without looking directly at them. They were little more than blurred shapes hovering within the aetheric air of the keystone realm.

Calling on my years of experience meditating, I let my mind sink deeper into that relaxed state, letting myself see without seeing, not actively attempting to understand but waiting for understanding to come to me as my subconscious puzzled out the shapes.

Family, I realized, recognizing one of the shapes as a carved rune. *Protect. Encourage. Shape. Future…*

They were all runes. And as I realized this, my gaze shifted to the rune that read "Future," and it melted away. I started again, slipping into that

meditative state and reading the runes. Some repeated, and there were many others besides those first few, but I found myself uncertain. When I'd completed the first keystone, the puzzle—the action I was meant to take—seemed relatively straightforward, even if the solution was not. But here, I saw the pieces clearly enough, but lacked context into what to do or how to move forward.

The startling comparison of the blank space in front of me to the second keystone interrupted my meditative state, and I felt a jolt of worry. *What if I'm not seeing the whole puzzle and, like before, something is missing because I lack some sense the djinn had?* But my sense of mana had returned as my insight into Realmheart strengthened, and anyway, I realized, this seemed intentional. I just had to figure out what that intent was.

I considered backing out of the keystone and returning to my conversation with Mordain, but meaning seemed to linger just at the edges of my understanding. *Just a couple of minutes*, I told myself, lapsing back into meditation.

Burden. Insight. Evolve. Family. Learn.

I read each word one by one without focusing on the runes, looking for some pattern or meaning. *Protect family. Learn insight. Shape future*, I thought, trying to pair them in case my thoughts would trigger some change to my surroundings, but nothing happened. Next, taking what I had learned from the first keystone, I sent out fingers of aether toward the paired runes, attempting to perhaps link them through my power, but when my aether brushed up against the runes, they vanished.

I attempted this experiment a few times with different word pairings, then with matched words, and finally with an entirely random sequence of the runes, but every attempt met with the same result.

Setting that aside, I returned to meditation to resettle my mind. *One more minute, then I will leave*, I assured myself.

Without making a conscious decision to do so, my thoughts turned to Ellie and Mom. The rune for *Family* drifted around me and burned against the darkness, so I suppose it was no wonder. But as I thought of them, hoping

they were well and wondering what kind of training Ellie had been doing with Gideon and Emily, my thoughts projected visibly into the blank space where the unfocused center of my sight was aimed.

My mother and Ellie, both appearing as I saw them in my mind's eye, a kind of blend between what they looked like ten years ago and how they looked in the present, hovered in that central space, framed by runes. But some of the runes were fading out, and it took a concentrated effort of will not to turn my gaze away to see which ones.

Instead, I kept that picture clearly in my thoughts and tried to settle my gaze so I could pull the meaning of the floating runes from the periphery of my vision as I'd done before.

Family. Protect. Guide. Love. Insight. Encourage. Grow. Learn. Burden.

My focus twitched to this final rune, and it vanished, as did the image of Ellie and Mom. All the missing words reappeared around the edges of my sight.

Guilt, I read, the word burning out of the darkness brighter than all the others. A subconscious connection, I wondered, or the keystone reacting to my own emotions? *My family is not a burden*, I thought forcefully, not expecting any response from the keystone.

But I had learned something, and I needed to see if I could repeat it.

Searching the runes through my periphery, I let my mind wander to the nexus of their meaning. This time, I conjured forth an image of the remaining Lances: Mica Earthborn, Bairon Wykes, and Varay Auray. In the image, they were in their uniforms, the white and gold and red not yet bloodied by years of battle, their features unscarred. Just as they had been when their images projected above the streets of Xyrus for all to see.

And while I held the thought of them in my central consciousness, I watched as some runes faded away and others came into focus in my peripheral vision.

Protect. Grow. Overcome. Shape. Fail. Shield. Learn. Burden.

This time I held my focus, not letting the surface meaning of any one rune distract me. I couldn't interact with the runes via aether, but there had to be some other method of interfacing with the keystone.

Grow. Learn. I held the meaning of these words in my mind, connecting them with the Lances. Their meaning, their connection, was obvious. The Lances had to grow and learn if they were going to be able to fight the battles to come, but they had also been an important part of my growth and learning. The runes could be read either way.

When nothing happened, I changed tact. *Overcome. Fail.* These words both applied to the Lances, but they were contrary, counter to each other. The Lances had failed to defend the continent against Agrona's superior forces; white core mages just had no chance of defeating Scythes or even Wraiths. But they had overcome their limitations and had never stopped attempting to grow.

Something changed in the atmosphere, a kind of charge resonating between the runes *Overcome* and *Fail*.

Reaching out with aether, I again attempted to manipulate the runes by pulling them toward me. This time, they did not vanish but were drawn from the edge of my vision directly into the center of my immaterial conscious mind, sending bolts of insight like lightning tingling outward through my brain.

I suddenly understood. It was almost simple, a challenge I had inadvertently been preparing myself for through my training with the aether blades, expanding outward with my consciousness as I controlled and reacted to several inputs at once. Through the effort of all those false deaths, as I learned to manipulate and control multiple blades throughout a broad battlefield, I had been learning to focus in an entirely new way.

And I thought I could see what it was building toward.

Rapidly, I began cycling through thoughts that seemed to form at the nexus of multiple runic meanings, forging a solid picture and then connecting the opposing runes with attached meanings. It required not only considering opposing ideas simultaneously, but actively splitting my thoughts to see a

picture differently from multiple perspectives while holding multiple thoughts in my head at the same time.

Like wielding five blades with two hands.

The insight flowed like an open tap. Two or three at a time, the runes faded and the keystone realm became more empty as my mind seemed to bloat with understanding.

With a suddenness that felt disconcerting, the keystone realm was empty, and I was being drawn back through the wall of purple energy. My eyes snapped open as fine black dust ran through my fingers, spilling into the dense carpet of moss.

A pair of bright yellow eyes met mine, and Mordain took a step back. “Arthur? But what…?”

I clenched my fists and tried to calm my breathing as my pulse quickened.

From my back, I could feel it, the new godrune heavy in my mind. As it had before, a name and history presented themselves to me, centuries of design and purpose and intent woven into the insight like a tapestry.

I reached for the ground to push myself up to my feet, only then realizing I was floating above the mossy floor. The atmospheric aether seemed to be pressing against me, like I was woven into it, holding me up against the force of gravity. Moving as if in a trance, I unfolded and stood firmly on my feet, a sudden sense of nostalgia mingling with the excited confusion of my success in the keystone.

“What happened?” Mordain asked, his voice tight, uncertain. To him, I realized, it must have looked like I’d gone catatonic for a brief time as I floated in the air.

“I solved it,” I answered, my voice rich with disbelief. After the long trials of the first two keystones, I couldn’t have dared to hope that the third would be unraveled so quickly. “I have it, Mordain. The third keystone power, another godrune…”

I pushed aether down my spine and into the godrune. A golden glow suffused the cave as my mind lit up like an endless web of branching

starlight spilling across the eternity of my own thoughts.

“A crown,” Mordain said softly, his gaze focused on the top of my head, where I realized the golden light was primarily radiating from. “A crown of light…”

As I tentatively felt for the emanation he was seeing, I understood. “The King’s Gambit…”

I released the godrune, blinking away the aftereffects of its use, breathless. I would need time to fully understand it and what it could do, but if that brief activation was any indication…

“I need to go.” I turned to the door, distracted. “Please have Chul returned safely to Vildorial once he’s—”

A strong hand grasped my wrist, stopping me. “Arthur, before you leave… there's something you must know.” Mordain’s demeanor was suddenly grave.

I forced myself into the moment—difficult after what I’d just experienced—and gave him my complete attention.

“You must be wary. The djinn didn’t reveal much of these keystones, but there was one thing I learned from Chul’s father in later years. The fourth keystone…when you enter it, Arthur, you will not be able to leave again until you have gained the insight it is attempting to teach you. A sort of… failsafe. If the task proves impossible, then your mind will be caught inside the keystone forever. And while you search for insight, your physical body will be vulnerable.”

I considered what he’d said, my jaw clenching as I worked against the building tension under my skin. Finally, I gave him a stiff nod, then turned away.

CECILIA

Keystones, godrunes, aether…Fate.

So much had been revealed, so many details I hadn’t known anything about before. About the past, and even about possible futures…but not all of it

mattered. No, I focused on the most important parts.

Arthur is searching for a power that will let him change "fate" itself, but even he doesn't seem to know what that really means. "But he's going to be vulnerable when he uses the last 'keystone,'" I said softly, speaking half to myself, half to Tessia, who I could feel vibrating attentively, just as invested in what we'd learned as I was.

'This could be it,' Tessia said, her excitement cut through with a sharp edge of fear. *'You have to see that, right Cecilia? We have to help Arthur find it, whatever it is. He could—'*

I laughed despite myself, then went quickly quiet, remembering where I was. *Help him? Why would I?* I lifted off the ground, flying swiftly but carefully through the lower branches of the trees. *This is my chance to defeat him while he can't fight back.*

Excitement surged inside me, vibrating just under the surface. I realized just how much I had been hoping to avoid another confrontation with Grey, and now I had discovered the answer to how I could defeat him without testing myself against his magic again.

'Fate itself, Cecilia. You believe Agrona can send you back to some kind of life on Earth, but that Arthur couldn't even with this new power?' Tessia asked, her tone one of disbelief.

I sobered slightly, a queasy, guilty sensation writhing inside me like the vines of the elderwood guardian. *I know he wouldn't. After everything Nico and I have done, why would he…*

'That's not true! I know he…I…' Tessia's assurances faded, and I could sense her doubt.

Agrona may have wanted to see me strive against Grey in order to grow both our strength, but he'll never allow Grey to claim this power.

'I'm in your head,' Tessia reminded me unnecessarily. *'I know that* you *know this is* wrong. *This isn't who you wanted to be. In two lives, how many people ever showed you kindness, Cecilia? Not the people who wanted to turn you into a weapon—a monster under their control. But Arthur—Grey—he and Nico were there for you. They still could be, Nico wants—'*

“You don’t know what he wants!” I snapped, my voice ringing eerily through the quiet forest. *Nico understands me, what’s being asked of me, what I need to do, and he’ll support me. He’s had to make hard decisions just like I have, and I forgive him for them! Just like he forgives me…*

There was something else that I didn’t dare give voice to, something new that creeped out even as I thought about Nico. Before, on Earth, I’d done what I had so that they wouldn’t use Nico against me, because I knew it would come to that eventually. And if I ever turned against Agrona, he would do the same. He could make all that torturous experimentation feel like a walk in the park by comparison, I was certain of it.

Agrona is…he’s my only chance to get what I want.

‘But he’s not, you just—’

“Enough!” I yelled again, louder, and a burst of mana spilled out around me, ripping several trees up by their roots and hurling them away.

A gargantuan insectoid mana beast burst up from the ground, its pincered head snapping this way and that as it searched for the disturbance. Instinctively, I lashed out with a whip of mana, and the creature split open from its head all the way deep into the long trunk that was its body. It gave a gurgling, chirping cry and collapsed into a wet heap.

Breathing hard, I sped forward even faster, letting my mind go blank as I felt and thought about nothing except the hurricane rush of wind through my stupid gray hair. Inside my skull, there was blessed silence.

Despite their affinity for hiding themselves, the Wraiths couldn’t completely shroud their presence from me, and it was an easy enough thing to find them again, along with Nico.

I didn’t land, keeping several feet between me and the soggy ground of the marshlands where they were waiting. “Nico, we need to return to Alacrya immediately. There is news Agrona must—”

“I think I’ve found what we need!” Nico burst out with excitement, like a kid on his birthday. He grinned, oblivious. “I decided to search one more dungeon while you were gone, and—”

“Later,” I snapped, eager to reach Agrona while all this information was still fresh in my mind.

Nico’s eyes shone with hurt, and I realized my tone had been much sharper than I’d intended.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly, drifting down toward where he was standing and staring up at me. “Nico, I’ve learned things. The rift, the plan, everything else will have to wait now. We need to get to Agrona.”

Nodding, he withdrew his tempus warp from the dimension artifact he wore. “Of course, Cecil.”

33

ABANDONED

NICO SEVER

As the tempus warp enveloped us in its magic, pulling us across space to the preprogrammed destination, I examined the bone-deep aching sensation that gripped my chest like a prolonged cardiac event. It was foolish—and human, too stupidly human. It wasn't really the sharpness of Cecilia's tone or her shrinking patience that made me feel like a twice-kicked dog dragging my tail in her wake…

No, what really bothered me was the fact that I couldn't help but feel this treatment was deserved. I didn't believe in karma as any sort of actual manifestation of results based on the inherent goodness of one's own actions, but every time Cecilia snapped at me, I remembered myself in the early days of her reincarnation—equal parts desperate and terrified— and how that unhealthy alchemy of emotions led to the occasional cruelty to her, the person I had done everything—given everything—to see again in this life.

She had lied to me, kept things from me…but I had done the same to her first. I had helped Agrona corrupt her memories and implant false ones in her mind, building myself up as some fairy tale hero of her previous life, scrubbing out Grey and inserting myself in every positive place throughout her short and unhappy life.

With jarring suddenness, we appeared in the receiving chamber near Taegrin Caelum's base. An eruption of motion and noise greeted us as the soldiers and attendants hurried to solute, visibly caught off guard by our appearance. Instinctively, my gaze panned across the faces, looking for Draneeve, only for me to remember an instant later that he wasn't there and never would be again. I had helped him escape.

I had *helped* him. After being cruel and awful to him, I helped him escape the twisted life he lived in service to Agrona.

Watching Cecilia's gunmetal gray hair bounce as she marched quickly past the surprised attendants, I steeled myself, wrapping up the hurt and crushing it down deep. I had failed Cecilia again and again, first in our last life, where I had let her be taken and hadn't found her soon enough. And then again, in the end, when I had been right there, but I had only watched as Grey ran her through…

I missed my step as I followed Cecilia up the stairs, a sharp exhalation slipping out. She turned to regard me with concern, but I waved it away, so she continued, surging forward on a wave of tension and eagerness.

It still didn't seem real, the knowledge that Grey hadn't intentionally murdered her. I inwardly cringed as I thought of all the things I had done, claiming that moment as justification for the most horrible actions. For years, back on Earth, I had fomented this hatred, biding my time as I planned how to take *King* Grey's life in revenge…and then here, reincarnated, hadn't I made destroying Grey and reincarnating Cecilia my entire life's purpose?

A memory surged unbidden into the spotlight of my consciousness. In it, I kneeled before a magical shield, rubbing my eyes and blinking in disbelief. Through the magical barrier, I was looking at a figure, hoping it was a trick of the light, a hallucination, a mistake, but then as now, there was no mistaking that gunmetal hair, even matted with dirt and blood.

My mind had raced as I wrestled with the understanding that Tessia was there, in the middle of the attack on Xyrus Academy, when she was supposed to be with Arthur. Draneeve and Lucas Wykes had captured her, were ready to…

I had been so *angry*. So ready to *kill*. Hadn't I repeated it over and over as my suppressed Alacryan self clawed and tore its way to the surface? Feelings so strong they had broken the lock Agrona had placed on my mind, but why?

I stopped climbing and leaned against the stairway wall. These memories had never been so clear. I needed to digest them, to understand something, a detail about my own behavior.

Ahead, Cecilia stopped and turned again, the runic tattoos highlighted against her skin, but I didn't see her. I looked harder, but I couldn't see Cecilia…only Tessia Eralith.

The truth was that Tessia had been so important to me that witnessing her near death had been enough to shatter a spell placed by Agrona himself. But not because I had been close to Tessia. No…it was Arthur. I knew how important she was to *him*, and he was—had been—so important to me…for my entire life…

Just as Grey had been on Earth. At least, until Cecilia arrived.

My best friend. My brother. And…I had *hated* him, tried to *kill* him…because of something he didn't even do.

"Nico? Come on, we need to…Nico? What's wrong?" Cecilia's frustration melted away into tenderness as she took a step back down the stairs. Her hand raised, reaching for my hair, but she stopped just shy of actually touching me.

My face was scrunched up with the effort not to break down into tears. "You abandoned me."

Tessia's mouth turned down into a deep frown. "Nico, I'm right here. I haven't left you."

I shook my head, struggling to control my voice. I had to swallow twice before the words would come out. "I was doing everything I could to rescue you, and you *left me behind*. You gave up on me. Do you have any idea how *torturous* my life was after you died?"

Her brows pinched together, her nose wrinkling as her frown pressed into a straight slash across her elven face. “More torturous than my own *before* my death?” Regret immediately flooded her features, and she let out a shaky breath. “You’ve never told me about after…on Earth.”

“There never seemed a point,” I answered, my voice a low moan that was almost embarrassing to hear.

“No, I suppose not. I…” She hesitated, swallowing heavily. “For what it’s worth, I thought I was protecting you.” Her expression cooled suddenly, one brow rising slightly higher than the other. “We’ve had days—weeks—to talk about this. I can see that you’ve been simmering in your own anger, building yourself up for a fight, but now isn’t the time—”

“Cecilia!” I barked, my voice amplified by the close quarters.

She flinched, and the expression of hurt was so purely Cecilia that she suddenly shifted in my eyes and mind, no longer the image of Tessia Eralith but once again Cecilia—my Cecil.

“I’m sorry,” I breathed out, choked by the pain and desperation to be heard. “I just…Grey. Arthur. I—he…” I shook my head, trying to clear the cobwebs from my stupid skull. “I didn’t just lose you. I lost him too, and without the two of you, I…don’t know. I lost myself.” I clenched my eyes shut so tight that stars began to burst behind the lids.

Soft fingers laced through my own, and my eyes snapped open. Cecilia’s face was hardly an inch in front of mine, looking down from one step above. “I’m sorry, I just didn’t know how to tell you. It was…a shock for me too. It took…too long to sort out the real from the implanted.”

I flinched at her words, which stung like the bite of a venomous hunter fly.

Cecilia’s jaw worked wordlessly as she seemed to struggle for what to say, then her gaze flattened and went blank, turning inward.

When she didn’t say anything for several long seconds, I cleared my throat. “Cecil?”

She scoffed and gave a small shake of her head, which she cocked slightly as if she were listening to something far away.

I squeezed the hand that was still holding mine, and her eyes refocused and jumped to me.

“What just happened?” I asked nervously, suddenly worried for her.

Cecilia’s jaw clenched as she ground her teeth. “Nothing, never mind.” She gave a small shake of her head and pressed her fingertips into her temples, looking pained. “We just need to find Agrona, and I’ll explain everything.”

“I…sure. Okay.”

Slowly, Cecilia began ascending again, grabbing my hand firmly and pulling me behind her. I let myself be tugged along, emotionally drained and mind blank as freshly pressed parchment. There were too many things to think through. I didn’t know enough, lacked the understanding to make decisions. The dread that Agrona was lying to us still sat in my guts like curdled milk, but I couldn’t be sure of anything.

There was a sharp edge of fear to my thoughts. I had seen it: Cecilia fraying at the edges like this. Her behavior was becoming more erratic, self-doubt bleeding from her pores. It was too much pressure, to be the Legacy; that was no different in this world. I knew the spirit of Tessia Eralith remained dug into her mind like a tick, but she wouldn’t ask Agrona to help soothe the voice again. If she let him in like that, he might see the lies.

The thought was too much, and so I focused on the thing I always had, Cecilia herself. The feel of her skin against mine, the sway of her body as she climbed ahead of me, the one true piece of knowledge that I was absolutely certain of: I would do whatever it took to ensure our life together. If this world had to burn for our new lives to begin, so be it.

Except, even as I had this thought—an old line of thinking worn into the pathways of my mind—I had to second guess myself. I didn’t allow myself to dig any deeper than that, not wanting to face the question of what, exactly, I would or wouldn’t do to ensure that our vision would come true. It was too difficult and painful. And I couldn’t think about the fact that there might be a line out there, invisible but already drawn in the dirt, that I couldn’t cross.

Cecilia led me to Agrona's private wing, brushing past guards and servants alike, unlocking mana-locked doors with a wave of her hand as easily as I might brush away a cobweb. When she didn't find Agrona waiting for us in any of the expected places, she led me down into a labyrinthine series of tunnels and rooms that I had never seen before.

"Where are we?" I asked, immediately uncomfortable.

"Some kind of reliquary, I think," she said off-hand. "I found him down here last time I visited, or he found me. He's got to be here somewhere."

Cecilia didn't open any of the doors as she rushed around, clearly navigating by her sense of mana. Despite a powerful but dangerous-feeling sense of curiosity building with each door we passed, I followed in her increasingly desperate wake, allowing myself to be dragged along like a frightened child.

After twenty minutes or more of going in circles throughout the expansive system of hallways and small rooms, Cecilia began to slow, the urgency of her searching draining out of her as it became clear Agrona wasn't there. We meandered a bit longer in silence, and I could see some thought simmering beneath the surface of her expression. Then, approaching it as if afraid of the contents, she came to a stop before one of the many, many doors.

"This is it," she said after a moment, her tone uncertain.

"What?" I asked only to immediately realize what she had to be referencing. "The rune-etched table? The one you took that mana from?" She had told me she'd found it but hadn't given me many details, and there hadn't been an opportunity to go in search of it before we were sent to Dicathen.

I immediately reached for the door, my many hours of considering and researching the piece of mana she had shown me surging to the forefront of my mind and pushing out everything else.

"Wait," she said, bringing me up short. Her turquoise eyes were shimmering, and she bit her lip nervously. "Should we?"

“Of course!” I said, excited to see this work of Imbuing for myself. “If it answers our questions—”

“But what if the answers aren’t…good?” she asked, and I suddenly understood.

“All the more reason we should know.”

Turning back to the door, I eased it open and entered. The room beyond was dimly lit from no definitive source and empty except for the artifact in question. A finely carved and crafted table, six feet long by about three feet across, took up almost the entire space. It was covered in runes etched deeply into the hard, glossy wood. They framed the top of the table with densely packed lines, then seemed to have been focused at certain positions across the surface.

I activated my regalia, and the table lit up with lines of connection and understanding as the magic attempted to help me decipher the runes’ combined meaning. “These formations, here, here, and here…if you were to lie over the top of them, they would be beneath your head, your core, and your lower spine.” I ran my fingertips across the runes, wondering.

“This bit seems to be a kind of array for storing mana—no, not storing. Transferring or capturing, maybe.” I turned to Cecilia, who was standing in the doorway, still looking nervous. “Perhaps it helped you contain the mana after your core broke down, but that seems counter to what I understand about Integration. And besides, the rest of the runes are too complex for it to be only that. You were right, these really are like nothing I’ve seen before. Maybe asuran in origin? A use structure originated by the basilisks and not integrated into Alacryan society?”

I continued to mumble to myself as I searched from form to form, rune to rune, trying to pluck out the meaning from each one, both individually and as groups in a sequence. And as I read, a prickly sensation began to grow at the nape of my neck, and the hair there stood on end. I wasn’t certain why, but the runes were making me uncomfortable. Was my subconscious beginning to peel away the layers of meaning in a way that my conscious mind hadn’t yet caught up with?

Taking a steadying breath, I pushed mana into the table, watching closely through the lens of my regalia.

“Nico!” Cecilia gasped.

The room collapsed in on itself. Starting from the corners, it folded over and over like a piece of paper, too rapidly to react. The space was warping in toward us, caging us within a distortion of space itself. I pushed out with mana, a formless emanation to hold back the effect, but my mana was simply folded into the distortion.

Shimmering within the field of twisted space, I could see another room, like a cage or cell. We were being folded through space into the cells beneath the fortress, I realized with a panicked jolt.

But the folding of space was slowing, the deformed air trembling, and then, more slowly, unfolding. The spell quivered, the forces of magic so powerful I could *feel* the cracks they were making in the fabric of reality around us.

“Go, quickly,” Cecilia gasped. Both her hands were held up in front of her, clutched and clawlike, and she fought against the trap, preventing us from being shifted away.

I didn’t need to be told twice.

Rushing to the door, I had to wait a long and painful second before it fully reappeared, flat and able to be opened, then burst through, reaching back for Cecilia. But she didn’t need my help. Sweat was building on her brow, but with each instant, she seemed to settle, and she strode, tense but in control, through the door and into the hall. When we were both safe from the spell’s effects, she released it, and the folded space snapped away, the table vanishing and leaving the room barren.

“He’ll know,” I said breathlessly, my eyes wide, my pulse hammering in my throat.

“Come,” she said, hurrying away and leading us out of the reliquary.

At each turn, I expected to come face to face with Agrona, but we reached the upper level without seeing anyone at all, and Cecilia led us to one of

Agrona's sitting rooms, where she poured two drinks, handed one to me, and walked away to stand by the window and stare out at the mountains.

I followed her lead in remaining quiet, knowing this was exactly the wrong place to discuss the runes and what they meant, and so I eased into a tall-backed chair, took a sip of my drink, which tasted of bark and honey, and leaned my head back.

Even if she had wanted to discuss it, I wasn't sure what to tell her. If I had days or even weeks to explore the runes at my leisure, I didn't know if I could fully decipher the intent behind them. But the more I thought about what I'd seen, the more uncomfortable I became. It wasn't coherent, there was no specific meaning for my discomfort to congeal around, but that didn't change the impression that I held onto: whatever Agrona had been doing, I didn't think it was meant to help Cecilia.

A bottle clinked, and I realized with a jolt that Agrona was standing behind the sitting room bar, pouring himself a glass of some crystal-clear liquid. He filled the glass two-thirds full, replaced the bottle, then took a small drink. He met my eyes, smacked his lips childishly, and sighed.

Cecilia had spun an instant before I myself turned at the noise. She bowed her head, letting her gunmetal hair fall over her face, and said, "High Sovereign! Forgive me for returning before my task is accomplished, but I have urgent news."

Agrona stepped unhurriedly around the bar and then leaned back against it, raising his glass. "To the unexpected!"

Cecilia stared at him for a moment, nonplussed, before clearing her throat and continuing. She explained that she had followed a phoenix within the Beast Glades, and her Wraiths had fought him. Just as they seemed to have him defeated, however, Mordain arrived, channeling some kind of domain spell that turned the world to fire around them.

"I thought it would be unwise to engage in a prolonged battle with him, and so I let him go," she explained quickly, adding, "but I tracked the phoenixes back to their home—the Hearth. I know where they have been hiding all these years."

Agrona nodded slightly, his brows raised. “And is that all?”

“No,” she answered firmly, continuing with her story.

I felt a knot of tension growing within me as Cecilia explained all that she had overheard while listening in on the conversation between Arthur and the phoenix. These artifacts of Epheotus—the mourning pearls—seemed like something *we* should control, not our enemy, but they were barely a footnote in the tale.

The tension built as Cecilia explained the keystones, Mordain’s story, and eventually Arthur’s gaining of a sudden burst of insight through the relic itself. Despite listening carefully to every word of her report, I had no idea what to think about it all.

Fate could mean anything—or even nothing at all. If not for my little knowledge of reincarnation, I would have said it was nothing but a red herring, a false trail that we should let Arthur stumble down to inevitable failure. But…

“You’ve done well to bring me this information, Cecil dear,” Agrona said after taking a moment to digest her words, just as I had. “This makes our complementary goals in the Beast Glades even more important, but also escalates the need to deal with Arthur Leywin.”

He smiled, looking inward as if sharing a private joke with himself. “From what you’ve said, it sounds as if this ‘keystone’ he retrieved from Mordain was the last piece of a puzzle he has been trying to solve for some time. Which means he has the final keystone already. He will go into hiding, of course, with no choice but to allow his allies to guard over him as the keystone leaves him vulnerable.”

“It doesn’t matter. I will carve through all of Dicathen if you ask me to,” Cecilia said fiercely.

My gaze flicked to her, but I did my best to keep the discouragement from my features.

Agrona gave her a proud, predatory smile. “I know you would, my dear; there is no question about it. But your role in this has not changed. The rift remains your priority.”

Cecilia’s expression fell, and she took a half step toward Agrona. “High Sovereign, I promise you this time Arthur won’t escape me. I…” She trailed off under the weight of Agrona’s stare.

“You forget yourself, child. You go where I wish, strike where I indicate. You are my sword to swing at my enemies’ necks.” His blazing stare softened. “Besides. When we move on the rift, every dragon in Dicathen will come flapping. If our effort there fails, then you will be caught between Kezess’s forces and whatever guardians Arthur leaves in place. While I am not willing to risk allowing Arthur Leywin to gain whatever insight the djinn have left behind should he prove capable of defeating their riddle, there is no route forward in which we do not control the rift into Epheotus, do you understand? That is your job. Without the dragons to defend him, I have other soldiers more than capable of rooting him out.”

Cecilia took a quick step back and bowed her head, her eyes on the floor as she said, “Of course, Agrona.”

His attention turned to me expectantly. I cleared my throat. “I found an intact device, High Sovereign. With this regalia, I am confident I can complete your vision.”

One corner of his mouth curled up in a slight smirk. “A match for your talents indeed. Perhaps I was wrong to be so dismissive of this power you’ve acquired. There is no need to explain why it is now even more pressing.”

He turned away, opening the door out to the balcony. A rush of cold air blew through the room, carrying the distant sounds of marching feet and shouted orders. Following him outside, I looked down at one of the courtyards that were built into the sides of the fortress.

The courtyard was full of milling soldiers. Instead of orderly ranks, I saw in their motions confusion and uncertainty. Even as I watched, more portals opened, spilling soldiers in handfuls out into the milling crowd.

“Wraiths and Scythes will not be enough to accomplish our many goals in Dicathen now,” Agrona continued. “We need soldiers. If we’re forced to search for Arthur Leywin, then we need eyes, as many as we can put on the continent.”

Agrona turned around and leaned against the railing, waving me closer. I took a shuffling step toward him, and he suddenly ruffled my already tangled hair. I froze, looking up at him in surprise. With the other hand, he gestured for Cecilia, who approached with equal uncertainty. He put an arm around her, standing between us like a proud father preparing to have his portrait painted.

“A changewind blows, as they say in the old country,” he said to neither of us in particular. “Everything is aligning as it should be. Our enemy will soon be divided, the Godspell in our power, and I have even invented a proper use for all those little rebel bloods who followed Seris in her futile efforts.”

His demeanor hardened, and his gaze cut down toward me. The fingers threaded into my hair curled just enough to pull and be painful. “And you two will be in your rightful place at the center of it all, earning the fairytale happy ending you both have worked so hard for. You need only do as you are told. Fulfill my vision. It would be a shame if you failed me now, with our goal so close.”

34

NOT WITHOUT COST

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Thick blades of deep green grass bent under my steps as I walked beneath the charwood trees outside of the Hearth. My thoughts were heavy and grounded, keeping me grounded as well. A mental shroud separated me from Regis and Sylvie; I wasn't ready to have anyone else's thoughts in my head just yet, needing some time to digest everything that had happened.

Everything I had learned, from both Kezess and Mordain, cycled through my head again and again. There were too many disparate paths to hold at once, and I was lacking too much information.

Leaves rustled in a low branch, and a fuzzy creature that could have fit in the palm of my hand shuffled along the underside, clinging to the bark with sharp claws. Its moon-silver eyes inspected me without fear. Despite its cute appearance—something of a cross between a flying squirrel, a lemur, and a bat—I could sense the condensed mana in its body, enough to classify it as an A-class mana beast.

After sniffing around for a moment, the mana beast vanished back up the tree, drawing my eyes along the wide trunk of the towering charwood.

"If only our responsibilities were proportional to our size, then I could leave all this to you, couldn't I?" I said aloud, the words mostly nonsense spat out

by my overtaxed brain.

I watched idly as the scuttling creature made its way around the tree, dislodging a leaf several feet above me.

As the bright leaf fluttered down like the smoldering ash of a bonfire, I imbued aether into my new godrune. A soft warmth radiated from my spine, keeping me grounded as I felt my cognitive abilities speed up several times over. The information I'd received and problems I now had to solve were laid out like a deck of cards, clear in my consciousness even as my mind split into several threads of thought at once.

Chul had faced off against Cecilia—nearly paying for that encounter with his life—but I had been able to heal him. Not only that, with the mourning pearl, he wouldn't just recover but his underpowered core would likely become stronger than before.

I had two remaining mourning pearls. I didn't know why Lord Eccleiah had given them to me, but as all the events and conversations of Avhilasha's returning ceremony connected to each other, I grew certain that he had anticipated the events of the ceremony itself, with his interest and "innocent old uncle" act just that. He knew more than he was letting on—perhaps even had some hint of future-sight about him. After all, Kezess had said specifically that *dragons* rarely experienced the kind of visions Sylvie was now having.

Which meant I had been given three mourning pearls for a very specific reason, and it would be up to me to decide when and why to use them, knowing that to save a life, I potentially condemned another in the future.

With the crown of golden-white light burning from atop my head, out of sight but still very much visible in my mind's eye, I understood exactly why such a thing was so valuable and rarely used in asuran culture.

Parallel to these thoughts, I held another line for Cecilia.

Her presence in Dicathen was a larger problem than I'd at first considered. Perhaps, with the assassination of Charon having failed, they'd sent her to finish the job, but if that was the case, I didn't see why she would be lingering around the Beast Glades. It was just as likely that Agrona had

decided to target Mordain, so Cecilia may have actively been searching for any sign of phoenixes when Chul stumbled right into her.

Despite Mordain's pacifism, the phoenixes' presence was both a wildcard and a potential threat to Agrona's plans. It had worked in Agrona's benefit for some time, as Kezess had indicated that the number or strength of the asura present in this world had—for a reason I didn't yet understand—been a barrier to his attacking Agrona. Now, however, Agrona may have decided the risk was no longer worth the benefit.

But the most likely scenario was that Cecilia was searching for the way to Epheotus on Agrona's behalf. I lacked the information to devise a solid theory about exactly why, although, under the effects of King's Gambit, my mind immediately speculated on several different possible reasons, each equally likely. Even still, I couldn't be sure of anything except the fact that Cecilia was the most dangerous piece on the board, and her presence was a disruption and a danger to everyone on the continent, even the dragons.

But Cecilia had been trying to cover her tracks, even staying out of the fight against Chul, which meant they didn't want us to know she was here. Either they were afraid of placing her on the front lines—because she would become a target or, maybe, Agrona didn't have full faith in her—or there was a chance that what she was doing could be interrupted. Having been caught by Mordain, it was plausible she had already retreated out of the Beast Glades, or from Dicathen entirely. Even if she was still in Dicathen, I couldn't pursue her without potentially sacrificing days or even weeks to hunt her through the Beast Glades, and there was a significant probability even then that she could evade me. She had a clear advantage: she knew what she was doing, while I did not.

Still, I couldn't let her potentially roam free throughout the continent. Charon would need to be warned and a patrol of dragons set to scouring the Beast Glades.

As more and more new threads appeared, each new thought weaving into the tapestry of congruent ideas, I sensed a subtle itch—the uncomfortable sensation from my core left by the wound Cecilia had given me with my own aetheric sword. I focused on it, and like insects scattering under a light,

the itch seemed to shiver along each of the individual threads of my thoughts.

I stopped channeling King's Gambit, shaking off the strange sensation. The leaf, which my eyes had been tracking in its flight, fluttered past my nose, then continued its way to the ground.

My mind seemed cluttered and muddy, my thoughts out of focus. I had to force myself to stand straight, and found my fingers digging into my chest, scratching at the core-deep itch that had already subsided.

It took some time before I could shake off the effects of the godrune and focus on my surroundings again. The creature had returned, creeping even further down the branches, and was eyeing me hungrily.

Letting out a deep breath, I let my mind return to the state I'd been in after waking from the keystone. My feet left the ground, and I wobbled slightly. Instinctively, I pulled on the insight I had gained and drifted up a few feet, slowly growing accustomed to the sensation. Then, with sudden speed, I launched past the little mana beast, through the outstretched branches and fire-orange leaves of the charwood tree, and high into the air over the canopy, letting the feel of wind through my hair help to clear the last of the godrune's cobwebs from my mind.

Unlike flying with mana, which was simply a matter of raw power and control gained by transitioning to the white core stage, the ability to fly with aether had been triggered through my insight into King's Gambit—or rather, some part of my journey to gaining insight had advanced my innate understanding of the interplay between the physics of this world and the atmospheric aether to unconsciously defy gravity.

The effect was the same: by projecting myself through the atmospheric aether, I was able to use it to push me up into the air and fly. But there was a lot less atmospheric aether than there was mana, and it was unnatural both in feeling and visualization, like discovering a muscle I'd always had but had never used. When I pushed *up*, I flew, the aether pushing me even as it slipped aside to let me through.

I looked back down at the trees. From below they had looked like towers, but from so high, they were diminished. Watching the wind move the forest

canopy, I noted a sense of drawing down as some subtle aftereffect of King's Gambit left my system. *I'll need to be cautious when I use this new power*, I thought, noting the way it made me feel afterward.

Despite the weight of everything resting on my shoulders, I couldn't help but smile as I shot out over the trees and banked south, gauging the direction of my destination before leaning forward and flying away over the treetops, the wind heavy and moist as it blew over me.

And so, as I pushed myself to fly faster and faster, projecting a strong aetheric intent to ward off any of the more powerful mana beasts that might decide to take a shot at me, I released the veil over my mind and reached out probingly for Regis and Sylvie.

'He returns,' Regis's voice sounded in my head almost immediately.

'Your thoughts are murky, Arthur,' Sylvie said. *'What's happened?'*

I quickly explained everything that had happened since I'd given the mourning pearl to Chul.

'For someone who seems to have just won the "get shit done" lottery, I'm not sensing a lot of positivity here,' Regis said with his usual charm.

I may have discovered a power that will let me think several things at the same time, but what I really need is the ability to be in several places at once, I thought. *Barring that, I need answers.*

Regis, who had stayed with Oludari and was now at the flying castle, guarding the Vritra's cell, brightened. *'Does that mean you're headed this way? I'd trade all the busty demon ladies in Alacrya to get out of here. I think I might be bored to* death.*'*

'All of them?' Sylvie chimed in, the mental projection of her voice tinkling like a silver bell.

'Well, not fair Lady Caera, of course,' he answered defensively.

I shook my head. *I'd say you got along with the aether centipede best of all, wouldn't you? Now, changing the subject…*

The act of flying itself was exhilarating, and Regis and Sylvie helped to lighten the weight of my many-layered worries, making it go by even faster. Still, with so many thoughts occupying my skull—and my ability only to process one thing at a time without King's Gambit active—I was relieved when the tall walls and peaked roofs of the flying castle came into view, looming out of the fog like a giant bird of prey.

The distortion field that had once hidden the castle was long since disabled, and two large dragons—one gleaming like sapphires, the other the dull green of mossy rock—circled the exterior. It took them a moment to notice me, as I lacked a mana signature for them to sense as I approached, but when the green dragon saw me, both banked hard and flew swiftly in my direction.

"Halt, who—ah, the lesser with golden eyes," the sapphire dragon said, beating her wings to stay in place. "We were told to expect you. Follow me."

Wheeling around, she flew to an open bay door—the same one that Sylvie and I had so often used to enter and exit the castle during the war. As I landed behind her, she transformed, her body shrinking to reveal a statuesque woman with pearlescent hair and armor the same color her scales had been in her dragon form.

"Come, I'll take you to Guardian Charon and the prisoner," she said stiffly, her deep-blue eyes, which were speckled with glittering white motes, studying me warily.

"I know the way." I strode past her, heading for a nearby hallway. "Has there been any trouble?"

She hurried so she was walking just behind and beside me. "Some of the scouts came upon a forest fire, likely the sight of an intense magical battle. But we found no source."

Acknowledging her with a nod, I searched automatically through the castle, sensing the powerful mana signatures radiating strength. Charon and Windsom were deep in the bowels, where I knew the prison was: the same prison that had once held retainer Uto and Rahdeas, the traitorous dwarf who helped Nico infiltrate Dicathen under the persona of Elijah.

I didn’t think of Elijah often, and I didn’t allow myself to do so now. It was too strange—too painful—to know that my closest friend in this world had never even existed, but rather had been a figment of Agrona’s twisted mind.

In all, I sensed five other dragons besides Charon and Windsom, as well as the familiar signature of an asura of the titan race. I didn’t know what Wren Kain would be doing there—he should be back in Vildorial, finishing the project he and Gideon were working on—but I would find out soon.

As I made my way down through the castle, my escort and I entered a wide hallway that brought me up short. The memory of my last time in the castle surfaced with a sudden violence, and I recalled bodies scattered over the floor, half trapped in the rubble that had crushed them.

It hadn’t really occurred to me earlier, but this was my first time returning to the flying castle since then. Since Cadell.

“It’s been repaired,” I said out loud, speaking to myself.

“Yes,” my escort said stiffly. “This flying castle was in poor shape, and it required significant work to make it fit for dragons of the Indrath clan.”

I brushed my hand against the restored wall, a pang of indignation bubbling up at the thought that any traces of Buhnd and all the others who had lost their lives here were gone.

Reaching the prison level, my dragon escort allowed me into the locked and warded dungeon but did not follow me within. In the guard room on the other side, I found Charon, Windsom, and Wren Kain waiting for me. Regis, I could sense further in, keeping an eye on our prisoner.

Charon regarded me with clear interest. “Ah. Arthur. Windsom has been filling us in on your journey to Epheotus.”

“Too bad about the young dragon,” Wren said, his tone empty of any actual sadness. “Of course, her clan will receive more recompense for her death than the combined families of all the lessers that battle destroyed, so I suppose there’s that.”

I searched Wren’s gaze, looking for meaning in the dark eyes half hidden beneath his greasy, drooping mane.

My expression must've given away my thoughts because Wren gave a sharp laugh. "Charon invited me to speak to the basilisk."

"I didn't know the two of you knew each other," I responded, looking to the scarred dragon.

"Oh yeah, Charon and I go way back," Wren answered with mock pleasantry. "He's not bad…for an Indrath."

Windsom glared at Wren, but Charon only chuckled.

"Anyway, I've been helping—*trying* to help the dragons make sense of Oludari, but he's been purposefully obtuse since you left." Wren crossed his arms, an action that made his hunched posture more exaggerated. "For a supposed genius, he sure does come across as a lunatic idiot."

I considered this. The fact that I was pitting the word of a lunatic basilisk who had every reason to lie and manipulate me against the lord of all the asuras—my ally—wasn't lost on me. But then, I already knew I couldn't take anything Kezess said at face value either. Every conversation with him was like a match of Sovereign's Quarrel, except I didn't necessarily know what the objective of the game was. With Oludari, it was much clearer.

"That's unfortunate, but nonetheless, I've come to speak with Oludari." I met Windsom's otherworldly eyes. "Then, per my agreement with Kezess, you're free to transport him back to Epheotus."

Expressionlessly, Windsom replied, "Ah, and here I feared you'd spend weeks, if not months, beating around the bush as you lessers so love to do. I am glad to see you being sensible for once, Arthur."

When I didn't reply except with a cool stare, Charon cleared his throat and gestured for me to follow. He led our group into the prison itself, which was empty except for a special cell that had been redesigned specifically for the basilisk. Oludari was chained to a wall with his arms held out to his sides, rune-covered cuffs of dull metal binding him at both wrists and ankles, and around his throat. When he shifted, his corkscrew horns clattered against the warded stone behind him.

Seeing me through the small, barred window of his cell, he gave a wide grin and his lips began to move, but I couldn't hear the words until Charon sent

a pulse of mana into the door and eased it open.

"—to save me from the boredom of these dragons," he was saying, the first half of his words inaudible within the warded cell. The affected grin slipped as his bright eyes burrowed into my own. "So then, human? Have you come to your senses? Am I to be returned to my homeland and offered the protection of the lord of dragons?"

Noting his unsubtle addition of protection to his demands, I stepped into the cell and looked around.

Regis was curled in a large ball on the hard stone of the floor. His eyes opened lazily as I looked down at him, and he winked. "I'm with the basilisk on this one. Please save us from the boredom of each other's company."

Oludari clicked his tongue. "I rather thought you more interesting than the rest of these self-important asura. Heartbreaking that you do not share the sentiment."

They let you stay in the cell with him? I asked Regis, probing his mind for his experience of the last couple of days.

'They haven't "allowed" me to be present for the interrogations,' Regis sent back, carefully avoiding looking at Windsom and Charon behind me. *'But they've complained loudly and often about how unreasonable and "insane" Oludari is.'*

You don't think he's insane?

'Something something fox and the hen house,' Regis thought blandly.

Stepping up close to the chained Vritra, I let my gaze sweep across him, lingering on the shackles. "I have spoken with Lord Indrath, and he has agreed to allow your return to Epheotus as a prisoner. But the specifics of that return—how long you linger in our world, a target for your *High Sovereign*—are left up to me. Your future hinges on you answering my questions, fully and without any games." I paused, letting him digest my words. "I haven't forgotten my previous threat: Preventing Agrona from getting his hands on you is still my priority, and if it makes more sense to kill you than send you to Epheotus, I won't hesitate to do so."

Windsom shifted behind me, but Oludari was impassive, answering only with an understanding nod.

I would have preferred to question him further without Windsom and Charon present, but I didn't give them the power to refuse by asking, as I already knew their answer.

Crossing my arms, I widened my stance and made a show of mulling over my words. I knew what I wanted to learn, but extracting the information from Oludari without making either him or the dragons suspicious was a delicate operation.

"Why does Agrona want to take over Epheotus?" I asked after several long seconds passed. "What is his goal in it all? Simple revenge against Kezess and the others of the great clans?"

Oludari frowned slightly, his eyes tracking quickly across my features. He seemed to be puzzling something out in his head. Finally, he said, "A good question, for what reason *would* the High Sovereign need control of Epheotus? To be surrounded by asura of the other races, many older and more magically powerful than he? To return to our homeland would, I imagine, be Agrona's worst nightmare. He has not spent these last centuries surrounding himself with lessers and lessurans without reason."

He paused, his gaze now flicking to the two dragons behind me. "Whoever told you this is, perhaps, attempting to distort your view of the overall picture of this conflict. The greater conflict between Agrona and Indrath, that is."

"Foolishness," Windsom scoffed. "Of course Agrona is attempting to return to our homeland. There is no other reason to wage war against Epheotus as he has done. His entire effort in forcefully taking Dicathen was simply to set the stage for the larger conflict, as we know well." His tone was stiff, almost forced.

Raising my hand for silence, I glanced over my shoulder. "I'd like to hold off on the extra commentary. I need to focus." Preparing myself for the flood of stimuli, I activated King's Gambit.

In Oludari's eyes, I saw the light swell around me, gathering and fusing until a many-pointed crown of pure radiance was hovering just over my hair, turning the pale blond to a bright, glowing white.

The crease of his nostrils whitened as they flared, and his pupils, focused entirely on the glowing crown, dilated a fraction of an inch. The skin around his eyes wrinkled ever so slightly as he squinted against the light.

The air shifted as it pressurized through a gap in the stone somewhere, and a few strands of Oludari's unkempt hair waved. "There is a leak in the stonework." My voice had a hollow quality to my own ears as it was filtered through the mind-enhancing aspects of King's Gambit both as I spoke the words and again as I listened to them vibrate through the air.

Beneath the smells of dust and stone, and more subtly, the distant flora of the Beast Glades, Oludari had a metallic, ozone burn to his scent, and the faintest trace of nervous sweat. Charon smelled of old leather, blade oil, and the blood of a fresh kill, white Windsom scented himself with some kind of flowery perfume that couldn't quite hide the distant, earthy fragrance of Mount Geolus.

'Ugh, why am I suddenly smelling myself? And why do I smell like brimstone and cinnamon rolls?' Regis projected, shaking his head slightly as my godrune-amplified thoughts flowed freely between us.

Behind me, I sensed Charon turn to look at Windsom, whose brows furrowed and jaw tensed as he glared at my back.

"You said before that Agrona is attempting to concentrate power. That he knew something. That this knowledge is connected to the layered dimensions that make up this reality. You said you'd tell me everything you knew." My words thrust at him like the tip of a spear. "If my current understanding is flawed, then correct it."

Oludari's eyes seemed to…flex, as if he were forcing them into place, preventing them from flicking past my right shoulder to Charon. "Of course, *your majesty*," he said, attempting to layer thick amusement over his voice, likely to hide the tension now gripping his throat and making his words come out strained. "Yes, as I said, he seeks power. Not to become a warlord and rule over Epheotus, but to consume everything. Like the world

lion, he would eat even his own young—the people of Alacrya—for dominance. But only after he has scoured Dicathen and Epheotus."

I compared his words and tone to what he'd said and how he'd spoken previously, dissecting meaning and timbre as I established a baseline to determine truth from lies.

Regis had sat up, and his eyes wobbled, going crossed. *'Nope, can't—oh, this is horrible. I think I'm going to blow chunks…'* His mind disengaged from my own, a barrier forcing its way between us. I could feel the wall's edges, the cracks within it, and knew I could punch through if necessary, but there was no need to force Regis's engagement with the conversation, even if his perspective might help broaden my own.

Somewhere far off, I felt Sylvie's mind similarly shield itself. *The effects of the godrune don't extend to my companions,* I noted.

"As much as I would prefer not to be a victim of such planetary cannibalism," Oludari continued, "I do think it is extremely amusing that you so gladly hold the dragon's tail, letting Lord Indrath drag you along wherever he wills, considering his own crimes are just as great, are they not?"

"Watch your tongue, Vritra," Windsom snapped, taking a step forward threateningly as Oludari spoke ill of Kezess.

I felt the desire to frown but cut it off before the expression could manifest. There was a heightened quality to Windsom's voice, an edge that suggested…a premeditated response?

"Tell me more about these layers," I said to Oludari, holding Windsom at bay with the quickest of glances over my shoulder.

Oludari's tongue dragged across the back of his teeth, and his fingers tensed, but he held them back from twitching. He had a high level of self-control, physically, an ability that had previously not presented itself when he was held captive by the Wraiths. This suggested a deeply ingrained fear of physical harm to his person, or even death. And, although tense, he was not currently afraid for his life. "You yourself come from a different world, correct?" he said. "You have a different kind of magic there—ki, I believe I

was informed. But neither of the other reincarnates could channel ki when they came to this world, because it is a different type of magic than mana, requiring a different atmosphere and biology."

Wren adjusted his posture, causing a muffled *clink* from inside his coat, like two links of a chain bumping together.

Oludari spoke faster as he continued, leaning into the story he was telling. "Another world. An entirely different structure of magic. Imagine it. The people of Alacrya are often limited to a single spell and its variable forms; the people of your continent just one element of mana. My own people can control all four primary elements, but only through the lens of our own understanding, which you call the attribute of decay. The dragons can wield pure mana and toddle about with their little aether arts, whereas the djinn wrote with aether like they'd discovered the native language of reality."

He let out an awed sigh, as if he had just said something profound. I noted the pattern of him telling me only things I already knew, and as I did, I felt the itch again. It wasn't in my core, but crawling along the thread of thought itself, deep in the folds of my brain.

"These are the layers I spoke of: mana, aether, even ki. Perhaps there are other types of magic out there as well"—the pitch of his voice modulated very lightly, and his eyes repeated the tense-without-looking flex from before—"but regardless, Agrona has never been satisfied with the basilisks' lot in life. Why would we only be effective in utilizing decay-type mana arts when we should have it all?"

This explanation didn't align with his previous statements. Tangential and perhaps even true, but nonetheless an obfuscation.

"You have been enemies with Kezess for a long time. You're aware of what happened to the djinn. Tell me, what do you think Kezess's overarching goal is?"

Windsom's scowl was audible. "Arthur, this isn't an appropriate line of questioning—"

Oludari snorted with amusement, interrupted Windsom. "He's playing 'King on the Mountain,' obviously."

“This basilisk is attempting to confuse you and pit you against Lord Indrath,” Windsom said, too quickly. “I would recommend you do not engage with him further.”

This time I was more certain. His words may not have been scripted, but they were premeditated.

Several tangled threads of thought wound around each other, and each one amplified the skittering, buglike itch that was vibrating out of my core and into my mind. The itch was being echoed from each simultaneous thought, no more than a slight irritant by itself, but the longer I channeled King’s Gambit and the more simultaneous threads of thought I activated, the more intense the sensation became.

Charon cleared his throat and rested a hand on my shoulder. “Arthur, perhaps we should take a break. You seem…strained.”

Some sign of the growing irritation must have leaked through onto my expression. I clamped down on the parts of my brain responsible for both the purposeful and subconscious movements of my face and body, forcing my pulse to slow, my expression to soften, and my every breath to come out calm and level.

“Windsom, why did you give Ellie a guardian bear?” I asked suddenly, following a new thread as I continued to hold the others.

There was a hesitation, a change in his breathing. I turned my head a few degrees, aligning my ear to better hear the micro-changes to his bearing that would normally be drowned out by everything else.

“I was trying to make you comfortable so that you’d leave your family. Even then, I knew how protective you were. Enough to forgo the experience of training in Epheotus if you were too worried about your loved ones.”

An honest answer, I gauged, but he’d had to decide first how truthful he was going to be.

“What will Kezess do with Oludari when he’s returned to Epheotus?” I followed up quickly.

I heard his response, but I didn’t worry over the words themselves, instead listening to the tone, the cadence. But it wasn’t truly Windsom I was focusing on, but rather gauging the intensity of Charon’s interest as we shifted topics.

I waited, letting the silence linger well beyond the point of discomfort, watching and listening to everything the three asura did, even cataloging Regis’s micro-movements.

For the first time, something broke my concentration, and my thoughts stumbled: the itching was more powerful now, like a swarm of ants gnawing on me from the inside.

But I was certain: Charon had made some kind of deal with Oludari. The Vritra’s answers were specifically designed to obfuscate certain facts. He would be returned to Epheotus and rewarded in a way I couldn’t duplicate.

Shifting gears to ensure I covered the other essential topic before I could no longer keep the godrune active, I asked, “The Legacy. Before, you suggested she wasn’t a weapon, but a tool. Cecilia is the key to Agrona’s absorption of mana directly from the other Sovereigns, but not only that. He seeks to unlock new powers for himself. Tell me, will she survive this process?”

A coy smile played across Oludari’s face. “Are you asking about the reincarnate or the vessel?”

“You’ve been paying attention. You consider yourself intelligent, which means you’ve planned for the worst.” I suppressed a shiver and had to forcefully hold my hand back from scratching my sternum. “How would you fight back against the Legacy if she came after you?”

Oludari raised one brow, his mouth parting slightly in surprise. He thought for a few moments, but his eyes never left mine. “Complete mastery over mana. No core, so her entire body acts on and reacts to mana. And she is incredibly sensitive to mana—which, I think, can be turned against her. She isn’t terribly creative, and so doesn’t make full use of her strengths, and she is mentally weak. If one were to overwhelm her senses and put her on her back foot, send her reeling, she would not quickly recover.”

As Oludari spoke, a new thread of thought broke away, forming into an idea, fledgling and dangerous but irrepressible.

I needed to delve into the fourth keystone to solve it and gain the aspect of Fate, but if what Mordain said was true, I might be trapped in it for an unknown length of time. Agrona had consistently proved to be several steps ahead of me, and I had no idea how many spies he might have in Dicathen. I couldn't simply trust that my absence would go unnoticed, and I had to accept that my use of the fourth keystone represented a dangerous moment for Dicathen. With Cecilia already on our shores pursuing an unknown goal, it would be the height of foolishness not to prepare.

But I could simultaneously protect against an incursion while I was vulnerable and ensure Cecilia was neutralized, at least temporarily, at the same time.

I asked a couple of follow-up questions, careful not to give away too much to either Oludari or the dragons, but was quickly reaching the end of my ability to withstand the itch, which came in the form of thousands of bugs crawling under my skin, amplified by every layer of my woven thoughts.

When I was done, I turned wordlessly and swept past the dragons and Wren, leaving the cell and marching down the hall beyond. Only then did I release my hold over King's Gambit, when no one would see how my face fell or the cold sweat that sprang to my forehead.

I felt Regis's mind return, touch my own tentatively, and recoil again. *'Hey, chief, you going to be all right?'*

I'm fine, I sent back even as I powered through the godrune's aftereffects. By the time I reached the prison entrance, I felt at least able to speak without slurring my words, and I stopped and waited for the others to catch up.

"A waste of time," Windsom said simply as he joined me in the outer guard chamber.

"Unfortunately, I have to agree," Charon added, outwardly chagrined. "I had hoped you'd be able to get more out of him when you activated that… spell?" He paused, looking at me questioningly.

I almost responded honestly, the words on the tip of my tongue before I swallowed them back down. Instead, I said only, “I’m satisfied. Kezess is expecting him, and I’d like this Vritra out of Dicathen as soon as possible—right now, in fact. There is no reason to tempt Agrona into some effort to reclaim him, regardless of my earlier threat.”

“Agreed,” Windsom said, looking to Charon for confirmation. The scarred dragon nodded his acceptance.

Wren, who had listened thoughtfully throughout my questioning, especially once the conversation turned to the Legacy, had come to stand beside me. “I’m needed back in Vildorial. Are you heading there as well?”

There were several parties I needed to speak with in the Darvish capital, but most of all I wanted to check in on Ellie and Mom. “I am,” I agreed.

“We’ve repaired some of this fortress’s functionality,” Charon said from behind me. “Including the teleportation devices, which were thankfully not destroyed entirely by the previous fighting. Vajrakor has also seen fit to relocate one of the long-range teleportation frames from western Darv into Vildorial, allowing us to move more quickly between strategically important locations.

“I can understand the convenience, but that’s a big risk,” I noted.

“All precautions have been taken to ensure the security of the city and its people,” Charon assured me.

I nodded, acknowledging that this was the dwarves’ decision to make. I wasn’t their ruler.

He continued to speak about the infrastructure changes they’d made around the largest of Dicathen’s cities as I led the way through the repaired hallways to the teleportation chamber. Despite the fact that they kept the artifacts deactivated when not in use, there was still a single dragon guard in place over the chamber, but they moved aside at our approach. Windsom and Charon stopped outside the chamber as Wren and I stepped through the wide doors.

Memories flooded my fatigued mind, and an uncomfortable but nameless emotion gripped my stomach like a fist, twisting it. I saw, as if reliving it

again for the first time, as wounded soldiers limped or were dragged from the room while I searched face after face, looking for the Twin Horns and Tessia. Tess had returned, but my parents' old friend, Adam, hadn't.

"Arthur?" Wren asked as he nearly bumped into me from behind. I had stopped cold without realizing it.

"Fine," I muttered, experiencing a strong sense of déjà vu as I faced Charon. "I'm going to need you to coordinate with a large operation soon, but I need time to plan out the finer details. Will you be here or in Etistin?"

Charon looked around at the castle. "I have decided to stay here and make this our base of operations for the moment. It is close to the rift, and the teleportation array allows us instant access to most of your continent."

Nodding, I quickly explained what I'd learned about Cecilia's presence, leaving out everything about Mordain and the phoenixes and instead making it sound like Chul had been scouting on my orders when he was attacked, and I had learned everything from him.

Windsom's frown deepened as he listened to my explanation, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

Charon, on the other hand, hung on every word. "That explains the site of their battle, then. I will ensure the guard on the rift is increased, although there is no way she should be able to locate it, if that truly is their goal."

I provided some suggestions on what to watch for and a few details about my previous battle with Cecilia, then Wren and I bade the others farewell. We activated the teleportation portal and set it for Vildorial.

The continent rushed by us in a blur as we were near-instantly shunted from the eastern Beast Glades to the very heart of Darv.

Over a dozen heavily armed and armored dwarves and a dragon in her humanoid form guarded the portal on the other side. They scrambled for a moment when we stepped through, but all quickly recognized Wren and me, and we were allowed by without trouble.

"When can we expect you to come review progress on our experiment?" Wren asked, stopping where our paths diverged.

“Soon,” I said, glancing behind me to the gates of the Earthborn Institute. “How long until you can have battle-ready prototypes in production?”

The titan’s brows rose behind his unkempt bangs. “There are already prototypes, but each one is individual, as are the…” He glanced around suspiciously. “Wielders,” he finished slowly. “It’ll take time to stabilize additional units.”

I felt my jaw clench and unclench as I considered my answer. “I can give you two weeks.”

His eyes widened, and he gazed down through the ground as if seeing his project through the stone, housed far below Vildorial in the deepest tunnels where prying eyes wouldn’t stumble upon it by accident. “Barely enough time to find new users, much less train and design…”

“We need as many as you can have ready,” I said, reaching out my hand to shake his.

Instead of taking my hand, he held out something that he’d been hiding behind his side, and I jerked my own hand back as if I’d been burned, staring at the object.

“Charon’s people found it in the rubble. When they realized it was asuran-made, they collected the pieces.” Held loosely in his grip was the handle of Dawn’s Ballad. About an inch of the blue blade remained, gray and jagged along its shattered edge. “It wasn’t the best thing I ever made, but I thought you might want it.”

Gingerly, I took the handle, turning it over and looking at it, overcome by the dizzying sensation of seeing a dream suddenly manifest in the real world.

Wren held out a small box. When I took it as well, he opened the lid to reveal gray shards within: what was left of the blade.

The smallest hint of a wry smile turned up the corner of his mouth. “I know how sentimental you humans can be.”

“Thank you, Wren,” I said simply, staring down at Dawn’s Ballad, or at least what remained of it.

He shrugged and turned away. “Come find us soon. There are quite a few things to discuss if you want a two-week turnaround.”

By the time I pulled my gaze away from his gift to say something, he had vanished into the steady stream of traffic moving along the highway that wound around the edge of the massive cavern.

My feet carried me blindly through the institute's gates and along its halls until I arrived at my mother’s door. As I reached up to knock, the door eased inward to reveal my mother’s hopeful face.

She looked caught off guard, almost as if she had been looking for me but hadn’t expected me to really be there. I could see the weight of a thousand words hanging on the tip of her tongue, and could practically imagine the scolding she would give me about Ellie’s state when she last returned, and with only Chul, no less.

But just as quickly, the tension and frustration melted away, replaced by motherly warmth and a sad sort of joy. She gave me a warm smile. “Welcome home.”

Mom snorted as Ellie recounted one of her many conversations with Gideon, and her hand covered her mouth in embarrassment.

Ellie burst out laughing, then purposefully mimicked Mom’s accidental snort. Mom threw a bread roll at her head, but Ellie caught it out of the air and took a big bite, looking extremely pleased with herself. The following laughter lasted for a long time and felt like a washcloth scrubbing my spirit clean from the inside.

“So, Ellie, I’ve been wondering,” Mom said, and my sister tensed, no doubt expecting some sort of ambush question. “You’ve never had a normal life, not since you were just a few years old. When your big brother saves the world and everything goes back to normal—whatever that is, really—what do you think you’ll do?”

“Become a housewife,” Ellie said without missing a beat.

Mom and I both blinked several times in silence as we struggled to digest this information. Boo, who couldn't fit in the kitchen and was watching Regis jealously through the door as my companion scarfed down a plate of leftovers, turned his head nearly on its side as he gave Ellie a challenging stare.

Ellie giggled and shook her head fiercely. "Oh, I'm kidding! Gosh. No, I think…" She hesitated, her eyes losing focus, and then a little smile curved up the corner of her mouth. "I think maybe I'd like to be an instructor in mana arts. At Lanceler Academy, or maybe even back in Xyrus. That would…kind of feel like going home, you know?"

We chatted for a while longer, inventing increasingly silly scenarios about what we would all like to do when the long war finally came to an end and Dicathen was safe. Mom settled on writing a book about my exploits, claiming she would be a rich elderly widow as she rode the coattails of my fame, while I assured them both I would retire, take up potato farming, and invent french fries.

And yet, all throughout dinner and the conversation, my thoughts lingered on Dawn's Ballad, my interrogation of Oludari, and the foundations of the plan that had started to form in the back of my mind.

As the small talk petered out, a comfortable silence was left behind. Buttressed by this silence, I withdrew the remnants of the sword from my dimension rune and set them on the table. Mom and Ellie both watched curiously. Mom, recognizing the handle, looked up at me with quiet surprise.

I gave her a small smile as I opened the box and dumped the gray, broken pieces of the blade out next to the handle.

Regis lifted his head to see over the edge of the table. "Ooh, are you going to use Aroa's to repair it? You know, I've secretly been hoping this would happen."

Smiling contentedly, I swept the blade pieces back into the box, set it on the table, and set the handle on top of it. "No."

The broken blade, I realized, had been the turning point for me. Up until that battle, I had always come out on top in the end. My belief in the inevitability of victory had been as sure as if I'd seen it in a vision. All of my training, all of my quest for the power to protect those I loved, it all came crashing down, shattered along with the azure blade of Dawn's Ballad.

Repairing the blade wouldn't undo my defeat or the long series of consequences that followed to define the world we now lived in. I glanced from Mom to Ellie, then to the wall, where a charcoal drawing of my father hung. Mom's eyes followed mine, and her hand reached out to settle on my arm.

Ellie let out a world-weary sigh that sounded much too old for her. "I can't wait for this stupid war to be over. To rebuild our homes, to live peacefully—where our biggest worry is what clothes to wear on a date…"

I raised one brow, regarding her seriously. "Despite the fact that I'd rather wrestle twenty Wraiths with my arms chained behind my back than watch you get ready for a date, I promise, El…I will do everything I can to make that future happen.

"But I'm going to need your help again to do it. And it's going to be dangerous."

35

A PLAN IN MANY PARTS

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Vajrakor's tense steps carried him from left to right and back again in front of the dwarven throne. The noise of each footfall was muffled by the thick red rug that ran the length of the throne room, a cool, cavernous chamber held up by carved stone arches that curved over us high above. Vajrakor was staring at his feet but stole a glance at me or one of the other people in the room every couple of steps. A single asuran guard stood to the left of the throne, staring straight ahead.

Just as the silence reached the point of becoming frustrating, he said, "So why not bury yourself in the deepest hole you can find, somewhere no one can dig you out?"

"I considered it," I admitted. "Spreading a story that I'd be going on an extended Relictombs trip or something to make sure my absence didn't spark a panic, then, as you said, hiding somewhere I'm unlikely to be found. But the Legacy is in Dicathen, or at least she was, which means Agrona is preparing something. He's escalating."

Curtis Glayder, standing near Vajrakor with his sister, frowned as he asked, "Forgive me, Arthur, but why does her presence matter so much?"

“Because something important is happening just behind the curtain, but we don’t know what,” I answered, keeping my voice level. “More importantly, the Legacy has a sense and control of magic that I can’t even explain. And she’s shown some understanding of the way mana and aether interact with each other, meaning I can’t be sure I can hide anywhere, truly. Not without her hunting me down.”

“But she can’t follow you to the Relictombs,” Caera asked, her first words since the meeting began. “Why not sequester yourself away within them? You could find somewhere safe with the Compass, I’m sure, and wait it out there.”

I shook my head. “I’ve already tested this theory. I can’t breach the keystone’s security measures within the Relictombs. Something about this one is different.”

A tense lull fell over the conversation, and I looked around at all those present, meeting each of their eyes in turn.

Bairon Wykes stood straight and tall beside Virion, who in turn seemed somehow thin and diminished, even though his gaze remained unwavering and his posture was poised.

Next to them, Gideon and Wren Kain both hovered impatiently. A straight-backed woman stood with her hands behind her back at their side, her torso bare except for a strip of dark cloth across her chest. She was covered in scars.

Caera stood just behind them, almost as if she were using them to shield herself from Vajrakor. Her red eyes caught mine, and she bobbed her head slightly, her deep navy hair shifting around her horns. Regis was at her side, settled protectively between her and the dragons, whom he glowered at unabashedly.

Mica and Varay were present as well. Mica was unsettled, shifting her weight from one foot to the other constantly. Her remaining eye jumped from person to person in an endless loop, while the jet-black stone of the other seemed as if it were constantly fixed on me. Next to her, Varay was still as a block of ice, even her short white hair fixed and unmoving.

Across from Virion, near Vajrakor, the Glayders both stood with perfect royal posture. Despite obvious efforts not to, they both kept shooting furtive glances at the scarred soldier next to Gideon.

Beside them, closer to me, Helen Shard stood a little back from the crowd with Jasmine, the two adventurers slightly out of place among the royalty and asuras. Of everyone present, it was these two old friends—whom I had known longer than even Tessia and Virion—that brought me comfort, which perhaps only made what I had to ask them even more difficult.

Finally, standing at my side like a shadow, was Ellie. She fidgeted nervously, her eyes focused anywhere except the other people in the room. The unstrung bow version of Aldir's weapon, Silverlight, was strapped to her back. She hadn't yet learned to use it, but I thought its presence brought her comfort.

Virion let out a low, thoughtful hum. "So why these locations specifically, then? Why this many?"

I gave him a soft smile as I shook my head. "I know my request is made more difficult by my inability to provide a thorough explanation. But this operation requires a certain amount of secrecy. I really can't tell you more."

"So far, you've spoken as if you know we'll be attacked," Helen said, "but you haven't even told *us* what this is about. How can you be so certain the enemy will strike now?"

"I can't," I answered simply. "This could all end up being unnecessary, but preparation is never wasted, especially in war. Agrona has proven more than adept at infiltrating and turning even the highest levels of our leadership. His spies have infested Dicathen for decades, and he has been ahead of us at nearly every turn. It would be foolish to simply hope that he won't discover and attempt to take advantage of my absence, either to come after me directly or to launch some kind of attack on Dicathen. We have to be ready."

Kathyln's brows rose slightly, and her eyes flashed to mine. "These places—they become targets. That's what you intend."

Ellie shifted beside me, and I rested my hand on her shoulder, shooting her a warning look. “These locations will, by the very effort of our actions, likely become Agrona’s targets, yes. It allows us to fortify and prepare in a way we can’t otherwise, and protects less defensible areas through deflection.”

“So we’re putting our people in more danger than they might otherwise be by following along with your request,” Kathyln replied, quiet but cutting.

“Unless Etistin were to become a target anyway,” Jasmine answered, dismissing the younger woman with a single look.

Curtis shot Jasmine a glare but backed down quickly when she matched it, her light red eyes flaring like cinders.

“I fail to see how the elves can be of assistance here,” Virion said, sounding tired. “We are no longer a military force in this world, Arthur, as you well know.”

“It’s not the elves I need,” I explained gently. “It is you, Virion. You were the commander of the Tri-Union’s forces during the war. No one else here can match your strategic and military mind.” *No one else that I can trust, at least.*

Vajrakor scowled at this but did not interrupt. Virion frowned as well, but his expression communicated something very different from the dragon’s.

Other concerns were voiced, and I did my best to ease them without downplaying the dangers. It was important that each of the leaders present understood what was being asked of them and what they would in turn be asking of their fighting men and women. These were the decisions required of rulers, but the fact that I couldn’t be fully honest with them was enough weight for my conscience to bear. If people were going to die while I chased Fate, they deserved to be prepared, even if they couldn’t know the truth of why.

Wren hummed into the silence that followed their flurry of questions. “And do these fortifications require the same escalated timeline as my—our,” he amended, looking pointedly at Gideon, “project?”

Raising my chin, I met the many pairs of eyes turned in my direction in a single sweep. “Two weeks. That’s all the time we can afford to make preparations. I’d like to do it sooner, but I understand what I’m asking can’t be completed overnight.”

“Two weeks!” Vajrakor said with a booming, humorless laugh. “Two months would not be sufficient.”

Wren’s brows raised into his unkempt hairline, and he gave me a look that said very clearly, *‘I told you so.’*

“My task can’t wait any longer than that. If possible—and if the risk to Dicathen weren’t so high—I would have started already.” Sensing the right moment for a distraction, I shot Wren a look and nodded subtly. “You all need time to think things over. I understand. I would like to speak with each of you individually to better answer your questions and plan the appropriate defenses. But while you are together, I wanted to give Master Gideon an opportunity to speak as well.”

“As some of you are likely aware, we are currently working on a military project designed to help even the odds against Agrona’s superior number of mages,” Gideon explained. He provided an overview of the fire salt-infused weapons, which the Forgemasters and Earthmovers Guilds were already working to produce in larger numbers. Then, he gestured to the woman at his side. “Claire, would you care to speak about the other project?”

Moving with a stringent military march, her long scarlet hair bouncing with each forceful step, she strode out into the middle of the chamber. Wearing only the strip of dark cloth and a pair of tight-fitting leather breeches, the large, jagged scar across her sternum was plainly visible. Although this scar was old and healed over, fresher scars radiated out from around it, the newest still red and irritated, only recently healed.

“Officer Claire Bladeheart, current operator of unit zero-zero-one,” she said with clipped military precision, then bowed, first to Vajrakor, then to everyone else.

Kathyln wore a subdued but proud smile, while Curtis’s eyes kept falling to the scars on Claire’s torso before snapping back up to her face.

She immediately launched into what sounded like a rehearsed explanation about her role in the secret project, giving those in attendance the full details of the new weapons and what they were capable of. “With the provided timeline, I believe that we’ll have at least twelve candidates who will be able to offer instruction to the new cadets, once the next batch of units are made.”

“And how many of these…units will be operable in the next two weeks?” Bairon asked skeptically.

“Perhaps a hundred or close to it—if we have the people to use them.”

Mica snorted. “Can a hundred make a difference? And against not *Scythes*, but these *Wraith* things, or hells, even asura.”

Claire went back and forth with a few of the others, offering some additional specifics on the capabilities of the project.

As I listened to her explain things I already knew, I felt my insides squirm slightly with discomfort. There was a certain kind of morbid edge to Wren and Gideon’s invention, but I understood the necessity. Perhaps, with time, the implementation could be more palatable. At the very least, it was an invention entirely of this world, created by Wren and Gideon alone, the fusion of human and asuran ingenuity.

More so than the explanation itself, I found myself focused on Claire. I had only just learned of her participation as an operator, but there was something *correct* about her presence. My old classmate, the head of the Disciplinary Committee at Xyrus Academy. It had been around six years since her core was destroyed during Draneeve’s attack on the academy, and when I’d last seen her, she had been a ghost of her former self.

Now she stood straight and proud, her explanation firm and exuding ambition.

It gave me hope.

After a lengthy discussion about the project, Claire left, and Gideon and Wren went with her, excusing themselves to return to their work, which was now on an aggressive timetable. That seemed to be a signal for the others to break free as well, but I promised to visit each of them in turn as soon as

possible and offer any assistance I could in order to put my plan into action. Caera hesitated, but I sent her out with a subtle gesture, and Regis returned to my side.

Ellie, the last to leave, gave me a quick side hug. “Should I wait?”

“No, you’re dismissed, soldier,” I said teasingly. “I’ll find you again soon so we can practice.”

Nodding, she hurried out, leaving only Vajrakor and his guard with me in the throne room. The Guardian eased himself down on the throne, watching me curiously.

“I don’t intend to draw more attention to Vildorial, but I’m afraid it will be a target anyway,” I said, moving to stand before the throne, which meant I had to look up at Vajrakor. “You need to be ready. I can’t say what Agrona might throw at you.”

He scoffed. “You mean, *if* he attacks at all. You seem to be suffering from some mythical thinking in regards to Agrona, as if he has magical insight into all that happens. It seems to me that even telling this group was a mistake.” Vajrakor leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “We haven’t even seen any sign of the Legacy you so seem to fear.”

“That doesn’t change the reality of our situation, which is that I refuse to discount Agrona’s ability to see and take advantage of our weaknesses. Now, let us discuss what Vildorial can do to prepare for another potential attack.”

After a frustrating conversation with Vajrakor, I left with Regis on my heels, already turning my thoughts toward the next conversation I needed to have, but I felt a weight lift from my shoulders as I entered the outer chamber of the palace entry and found Sylvie waiting for me.

Despite her aging through the process of her “death” and “rebirth,” Sylvie still looked young standing apart from the few clan lords and high-ranking guild members who lingered around the palace. Once, she stood out

wherever she went, with her dark horns jutting up from her pale blond hair, but now she wasn't even the only dragon in the room, as a second of Vajrakor's guards lingered near the entryway, looming over everyone who came and went.

How did things go with the survivors?

'Well enough,' she thought back, a throughline of sadness undercutting her words. *'Those people—the few who survived—won't recover quickly from the trauma they've experienced.'*

'From one tragedy to the next…' Regis added darkly.

I cleared my throat and indicated for her to follow me, leaving the palace and heading upward along the tunnels and stairs leading to Virion's retreat. Sylvie filled me in on everything happening in Xyrus as we walked.

Entering the cavern housing the last remaining tree from Elenoir was sort of like going through a portal into another world. So bright and green, it was easy to forget you were underground.

The cavern had changed somewhat since we were last there. A large section of the ground had been tilled and was now growing a variety of plants, mostly small tree seedlings. Virion was on his hands and knees in the soil, carefully uprooting one of the seedlings with a trowel. Bairon stood behind him wearing a pair of gardening gloves and holding a glass jar half full of soil.

"You're early," Virion grumbled under his breath, easing the seedling down into the jar, which Bairon carefully set aside in a cart full of similar jarred plants. "I assumed Vajrakor would keep you all day."

"What's all this then?" I asked, leading Sylvie and Regis over to the garden. Glancing at Bairon, I added, "That's a good look for you."

He regarded me with his usual coolness. "Whether I wear steel gauntlets or leather gardening gloves, I do so for the good of Dicathen."

Virion gave a loud and indelicate snort. "I've been experimenting with the soil from Epheotus and the seedlings of this great tree. We've already even transplanted a few to various out-of-the-way regions around the Elenoir

Wastes. I’m hoping to extrapolate the unique qualities of the soil and how it affects the seeds, but Tessia was always the expert in plant-attribute mana.”

Quiet fell as the old elf stared down into the jar.

“Tessia…” Virion lifted his gaze, searching mine for any semblance of hope. “How does she fit into all of this?”

I had expected this from him and had spent quite a lot of time considering how to handle the Legacy. “If Agrona attacks, we have to expect that the Legacy will be at the forefront. Not to put too fine a point on it”—I met Bairon’s hard gaze—“but no one other than me can hope to even delay her, much less put up a fight. I’m not sure even I can defeat her in battle. Which is why we’re not going to fight her at all.”

I raised my hand, forestalling the barrage of questions I was certain were coming. “I can’t give you the details, but I’ve already got a plan on how to remove her from the battle, at least for a while—without harming Tessia,” I added hurriedly as a scowl formed on Virion’s face. “As for you, I apologize for putting you on the spot earlier, in the meeting. You are right. You should take your people and go hide somewhere, away from the likely targets. The borderlands at the base of the Grand Mountains, perhaps, or northeast Sapin where there is nothing to draw Agrona’s attention.”

Virion stood, seeming to shake off some of the fatigue and tiredness. He gave me a penetrating look. “No, you were right. Vajrakor and the dragons can’t be trusted to keep the best interest of the human and dwarven soldiers in mind. I can’t leave the protection of this continent to the same creatures that destroyed my homeland, Arthur.”

I mulled over my words before saying, “There is no shame in staying out of the fighting, not after everything that your people have already sacrificed to this war. Elenoir deserves to be replanted, and you deserve to be the one who accomplishes that.”

Virion swallowed heavily, and Bairon shifted, taking a half-step closer.

“Perhaps regrowing the forests of Elenoir won’t be enough to balm the guilt of my many failures,” Virion said, his gravelly voice softening to barely above a whisper. “And if I keep fighting, maybe I won’t even live to see it.

If that’s what it takes to ensure that the elves are, one day, able to return to the forests that birthed them, then that is a sacrifice I am willing to make.” He took a steadying breath. “Although, if I had one last wish, it would be to walk beneath the trees of Elshire once more with Tessia at my side. Then, I can call my time in this world well spent.”

Reaching out, I wrapped my arms around his thin body, foolishly afraid that I might snap him in half as I gave him a light hug. “Thank you for everything, Gramps.”

He let out a rough snort. “Brat.”

With a firm shake of Bairon’s hand, I gathered Sylvie and Regis, and we headed back down the long stairs that would return us to the palace. From there, my next stop was deep beneath the city, and so we wound down the highway that circled the city, built into the great cavern’s walls.

Once we were beyond the populated part of the city, I channeled King’s Gambit. By lightly imbuing the godrune with aether, I could activate it only partially. While it still glowed golden from my spine, it didn’t conjure the blazing crown atop my head—which seemed like a great way to start any number of unwanted rumors about me.

The result was an ability less powerful than what I’d used against Oludari but still allowed me to break my thoughts apart into pieces in a way that wasn’t possible without the godrune. I’d already found this invaluable as I outlined the many layers present in the plan I was attempting to put into place.

Sylvie and Regis followed my thoughts quietly, struggling to keep in tune as I considered my previous conversations, how the attitudes of everyone involved might impact the execution of this plan, and also outlined the conversations to come. There was a cold comfort to being under the effects of King’s Gambit; it was easier to strip away the emotion—all the fear and guilt—and approach the necessary solution logically.

With my plan still sitting in its box like a jigsaw puzzle divided into many disparate pieces, it was difficult to see it all without the godrune, and so I’d been spending every spare moment with King’s Gambit active.

As we crossed into one of the larger caves on the way to the deep workshops, a flash from Regis dragged all my threads of thought back into alignment.

Caera stood by herself atop a flat rock that divided a stream running through the cave. Her figure was little more than a silhouette in the flickering light of a fire that burned from the stream's shore.

Moving slowly, she drew in a breath and then pushed her hands outward. Light filled the cave as a fiery wave of heat rolled out of her, the water hissing and steaming in response. I squinted through the heat distortion as Caera seemed to vanish, melting into the shadows and steam. She flickered in and out of view, then the heatwave and steam both diminished.

Only then did she turn to look at us, a pleased smile half suppressed. "I was hoping you'd be down soon."

"Caera," I said in greeting. "How is your family?"

"Fine," she said simply. "Shaken up and, I think, questioning their decision to follow Seris…not really, but you know what I mean. I couldn't bring myself to stay out in those wastes with them, though, and I'm glad I returned. I've been helping Gideon and Emily with the next stage of their testing with the spellforms. They wanted to study Alacryan runes, and to see if someone who already had some would experience these…spellforms differently."

"I assumed," I said simply, gesturing to the water that had, only moments ago, been hissing with steam.

A grin suddenly bloomed over her features, and she half turned and pulled up her shirt, revealing the runes hidden beneath, including one higher and larger than the rest. "I received a Regalia! Or—" She cut herself off, seeming to realize the position she was in, and then slowly lowered her shirt. Clearing her throat, she continued, "That…wasn't very ladylike. I apologize."

I heard the words preparing to bubble up out of Regis like a geyser before he had quite started to speak, and I trod heavily on his foot.

“No, it wasn’t,” I answered, although I didn’t try to hide the laughter in my tone.

“Anyway, there is something distinctly less…forceful about the Dicathian application of spellforms,” she said, wry amusement lending a cutting edge to her tone. “I’m not entirely certain that these spellforms align to the same classifications used in Alacrya, especially for those of us who have benefited from your…proximity.” She glanced away, one hand feathering through her hair as she tucked it back behind her horns.

I was quiet for a moment, thoughtful, then I turned to my companions. “Could I…have a moment alone with Caera, please?”

Sylvie’s brows rose a fraction of an inch before she controlled her expression. Putting a hand on Regis’s mane, she said only, “Of course. We’ll continue on, then.”

“Whoa, uncool. We’re the horny *trio*, remember, *trio*, not the—”

Grabbing one of his horns, Sylvie steered Regis away, cutting off his protests. Caera raised her hand in a small wave, then regarded me thoughtfully.

I waited until they were gone and raised the mental barrier between us. “Do you know what we’re doing down here?”

She hesitated. “I’ve seen the mana beasts, but nothing more. Gideon rambles sometimes, but Emily Watsken seems efficient at keeping him on track.”

I took a couple of steps closer, stopping just on the bank of the stream, and stared down at my feet. “I’m sorry, Caera.”

Although I wasn’t looking at her, I heard the shifting of her posture. “What for?”

I shook my head, struggling with the words. My thoughts jumped immediately to King’s Gambit, but I pulled back from the idea, not wanting to give this task over to the cold logic of the godrune. “There is something I haven’t been able to get out of my head. In Etistin, after the attack on

Oludari, Lyra had lied about something, but the lie wasn't for us. It was for the dragons. And I know why."

I took a fortifying breath and held her gaze. "Agrona plans to make use of the Alacryans already here in Dicathen. He ordered his Wraiths to leave them alive, but also to send them a message. I've seen the curses your people can wield—that Agrona can wield. A Wraith detonated right in front of me before he could spill any of Agrona's secrets."

"You believe you can't trust me because of my Alacryan blood." She frowned at me, puzzled. "But I've been among those people, Arthur. There are no loyalists among them, not after everything they've seen and experienced. I've never heard of anything like that happening to regular foot soldiers. Surely he—"

"I don't know how or what kind of power he has over your people, but the threat was real enough that Lyra couldn't even speak the idea in front of others. I'm sorry, Caera. You can't be involved in any of this. You can't know what we're doing…none of it."

Her head drooped, a curtain of blue hair falling over her face. Only a moment passed, and she shook her hair out of her eyes, looking at me calmly. "After everything, all our time together—meeting my parents, sharing my bedroll—it all comes down to blood in the end." Despite her best efforts to make the statement sound like a joke, she didn't quite manage it.

"It's not as simple as that—"

"Oh, Arthur," she said, adopting the forced formality of her upbringing. Stepping down into the water, she waded across until she was standing in front of me, still up to her ankles in the cold stream. "I may be an Alacryan, but I'm a *highblood*. I can take bad news in stride."

She held out her hand like a royal waiting for supplication. I took it, bent low, and pressed my lips to the back of her gloved hand, playing along. But when I looked up at her face, there were tears in her eyes.

Then her hand pulled out of mine, and she marched away, water flinging ahead of her with each step. As she reached the cave's exit, however, she

stopped and looked back over her shoulder. “I wonder how all this might have been different if I was born on this continent. Had we met under different circumstances, what could our relationship have become?”

As she disappeared into the darkness of the tunnels, I forced myself not to call out to her. I’d done what needed to be done, and I couldn’t take it back. Not if I was going to keep Dicathen safe.

It took a few minutes for me to get moving again, and I took my time as I marched along the sloping tunnels toward the massive facility Wren and Gideon had built in the depths.

A handful of dwarven guards stood at attention outside a heavy vault door, but the door was ajar, and they pulled it open as soon as they saw me, likely already expecting me from Regis and Sylvie’s arrival.

Inside, a small room was surrounded by mana-infused glass windows that looked down on the rest of the complex. Regis, Sylvie, Wren, Gideon, and Emily were already there, and their conversation died down as I entered.

Emily crossed her arms as I approached and gave me a look that was half pout, half scowl. “Two weeks? Are you nuts?”

I couldn’t bring myself to smile. “I’m certain you can do it. Because there isn’t any other choice.” To Wren, I added, “I’ve figured out the rest. I know what I need you to do.”

“Once I enter, no one else comes in under any circumstances,” I explained, walking away from the chamber Senyir had built within the roots of the Wall itself.

“We understand,” Helen answered, following me with the others as we headed for the elevator that would take us to the top of the Wall. “With the Adventurers Guild taking over fortification of the Wall, it’ll be a lot easier to ensure your safety while holed up here. Many of the soldiers who were stationed here—although good, loyal men—hadn’t gone home since before the war started.”

“And the civilians have all been evacuated?”

I glanced between Helen, Jasmine, Angela Rose, and Senyir, Jasmine’s older sister. Senyir was taller and more muscular than Jasmine but had the same red eyes and dark hair. Her skin was tanned a deep almond in color—testament to long hours working out under the forge.

“They have,” Jasmine answered. “Most to Xyrus and Blackbend. The Helstea girl’s team was helpful in that.”

As we reached the elevator and a young adventurer with dull orange hair opened the door, I turned to Senyir. “I know there wasn’t much time to make this happen. Thank you. If everything else goes to plan, I’ll be back in about a week to start the final phase.”

“Of course, General Leywin,” she said forcefully, then gave an equally strong nod that was almost a bow. “Thank you for this opportunity to right the Flamesworth name.”

A sharp breath blew out through Jasmine’s nose as she regarded her sister with an odd expression. “The Flamesworth name does not need righted. Only the name ‘Trodius’ suffers.”

Senyir smiled sadly. “I’m not entirely sure our siblings would agree with you.” Senyir’s hand caressed the back of Jasmine’s hair. “Still, I’m glad we’ve had this time together, Jasmine.”

Jasmine’s intense gaze softened, and she patted her older sister twice on the back before hurrying into the elevator. Nodding to Senyir, I followed, and once we were all in, the elevator began lurching its way up the Wall.

Angela Rose cleared her throat, looking from Jasmine to me. “Are you *sure* this is the best place, though? It’s been pretty beat up. It’s defensible enough, I guess, but isn’t it a bit…obvious?”

“Exactly,” I said, looking out of the mesh as the buildings grew smaller and smaller beneath us. “This may all amount to nothing, but—”

“Arthur,” Jasmine interrupted, resting one hand on my arm. “We all lived through the war. We’ve seen what our enemy is capable of. Some people on this continent may be smitten enough with our dragon overlords to expect

that they'll save us from any danger, but we know better. Whatever you're doing, however long it takes, we'll hold the line."

I nodded, suppressing the emotions her words conjured in me.

We reached the top with a small jerk and stepped out onto the walkway. A cold wind blew down from the mountains, cutting across the top of the Wall with a noise like a howling mana beast. Sylvie was already up there, gazing out at the Beast Glades, her mind elsewhere. Regis manifested from me, stepping up out of my shadow and hopping up to place his front paws on top of the crenulations flanking both edges.

We all stood in silence for a bit, looking out over the Wall and the Beast Glades beyond. "You all know what to do, then. I need to see to the other locations, and then I'll be back."

Jasmine squeezed my arm. Helen, grinning, reached up and tousled my hair.

Suddenly, Angela Rose jumped forward, pulling me into a crushing hug. Memories of my first time meeting her with the Twin Horns surfaced as I looked down at the top of her head pressed against my chest.

When did she get so small?

"You tell your mom we're going to take good care of you, all right?"

I returned her hug, ignoring the jealous pang seeping into me from Regis. "I will."

I finished my farewells with Jasmine and Helen as Sylvie rose up into the sky. Regis melted back into my body as I turned away, violet lightning wrapping around me as the aetheric paths lit up in my view. I resisted looking back, not confident I'd be able to give them the genuine look of reassurance that I knew they wanted to see. I took a step high up into the air, the Wall over a hundred feet below now.

Leaning forward, I began to fly.

“I told you it wasn’t much,” Madam Astera said with a shrug as we entered a small cave. “You’re certain *this* is where you want to…do whatever it is you’re doing?”

Kneeling, I ran my fingers along a rust-stained patch of the floor, imagining how much blood must have pooled here to leave a mark well over a year later. This was the very spot where Astera had led her troops after their defeat at the Battle of the Bloodfrost. “I’m certain,” I said simply as I looked around. “I need an earth mage or a smith to craft a pedestal right here.” I indicated a spot directly in the center of the cave, marking it with a rock and providing specific dimensions.

“I feel it necessary to point out that you being so close to Etistin does cause some risk for the city, does it not?” Curtis asked with the air of a diplomat.

“Varay will be in the city to help with the defenses,” I assured them, “and you will have your own forces as well as dragons. With the city so heavily defended, and the enemy’s attention divided among several locations, I’m confident you can hold out. At the same time, even if they don’t attack, they won’t be free to turn over every rock and tree with the city at their back.”

Varay stepped forward and gave me a small bow. “Arthur, in that case I would like to stay here with you. If you are unable to defend yourself, you shouldn’t risk—”

“No,” I said. The softly spoken word smothered Varay’s argument like a pillow. Standing, I met each of their eyes in turn. “My success relies on my not being found. Perhaps it will only be hours, and nothing will happen in the meantime. But we need to prepare for the worst. For you all, that means telling no one—not even our allies—about this part of the plan. Defend your city—your people—but don't draw attention to this spot no matter what happens.”

“But what if it seems as if they’re going to find you?” Curtis asked, his confusion apparent.

I met his eyes. “Then distract them.”

Kathyln’s head fell, but only for a second. When she looked back at me, her eyes flashed. “Arthur, you are essentially asking that we spend our soldiers’

lives to draw the enemy's attention so that you may stay safe, and yet you have not even told us what it is that you are doing. Please, we need to know more. We aren't your subjects to simply do as we're told."

I stepped closer. Kathyln's icy demeanor reminded me forcefully of how she had acted back in school, at Xyrus. But I knew it was only a shield that she put up to keep herself safe from those around her, and now was no different.

"I'm preparing the final strike of this war." I let the words settle down over the others like slowly falling ash.

Madam Astera's jaw stiffened, and she unconsciously shifted her weight to her good leg.

Curtis again glanced at his sister, but Kathyln's eyes were on me, her face a hard mask.

An involuntary tremble ran through Varay, the rare crack in her cold facade. "Then we will ensure you have the time you need."

Once I had clarified everything that I needed done and set the deadline for only a few days later, I left, flying toward Etistin's teleportation gates while leaving the others to return under their own power. Sylvie flew quietly at my side.

'It's not like you to put people in danger and not even tell them the truth about it,' she said at length, an edge of concern lacing her thoughts. *'What if we return from the keystone and find Kathyln, or Jasmine, or even* Ellie *dead, because we didn't tell them enough?'*

My mind was blank for a long moment, capable of forming no coherent thought. *Ellie and Mom will be as safe as I can make them,* I answered at length, not bothering to justify my actions.

'The rest, though?' Regis chimed in, his frustration clear even as he tried to keep up some barrier between us. *'Caera? After everything we've been through together?'*

I sighed, the wind whipping my breath away. *If Agrona is able to target and use Alacryans against them, or turn any of them into a bomb as he did the*

Wraiths—

‘But you don’t know he can,’ Regis shot back. *‘Just because that godrune makes you think* fast *doesn’t mean you’ll always think* right*. I know success is important, but what’s the point if you lose everyone along the way because of it.’* He hesitated, searching inward for a moment, then continued, *‘Wow…that did not sound like me. I’m getting soft because of you.’*

‘He’s not wrong,’ Sylvie thought, looking over at me from the left. The wind whipped her hair behind her like a flag. *‘I think the godrune brings forward the Grey in you, Arthur.’*

I gritted my teeth and pushed on faster. *Maybe that’s what we need right now.*

It was almost time. The two weeks were up, and very nearly everything was prepared.

Deep, deep beneath the desert, far even beneath the crumbling remains of the djinn sanctuary, Ellie, Sylvie, Regis, Wren, and I stood in the room containing the Relictombs portal, which had changed drastically since we’d been there last.

“Will this be enough?” Regis asked, loping around and inspecting the chamber.

Wren, who was drifting along in a floating marble throne, shrugged noncommittally. “I’d be willing to match my ingenuity against the strength of any lesser in this world, but I can’t speak for the Legacy. If the boy’s idea works, this will work. If it doesn’t…” He shrugged again.

I approached a raised stone pedestal in the very center of the chamber, above where I knew the Relictombs portal now rested. “Here, El. This one’s going to be a little different from the others.”

Ellie turned away from a notched piece of wall that she’d been examining, concern etched into her features. “What? Why?”

I tapped the pedestal, and she hurried toward me. “Since this is where I’m actually going to be, this one needs to be more powerful to wash out my presence. But your mana still has to hold it. If it breaks down or gives out over time…” I trailed off meaningfully.

“It won’t,” she said decisively. “It’s like…a splinter, stuck in my head. At least after they’re set up. A little annoying, but they won’t be an impediment, and I won’t let them break down or fail or whatever. I can do this, Arthur.”

I gave her a warm smile. “I know you can.”

Taking Sylvie’s hand, Ellie began pouring silvery mana into the curved recess at the top of the pedestal. It formed into a sort of egg-shape, hollow in the middle with thick walls. Sylvie laced her own into it as well, letting her signature radiate out from the molded mana.

“Better reinforce it even more,” I said, then watched as Ellie responded to the command, molding the container’s shape as she input more mana.

When it had wrapped around to nearly come to a close at the top, I imbued the central reservoir with aether, just as we had done in the mind zone to navigate from platform to platform. Compacting the aether inside the container, I forced as much as I could without threatening the integrity of the conjuration. When I eased off, Regis breathed his own aether into the egg, just to be safe, and then Ellie took back over, filling in the small space at the top and closing off the aether from the outside world.

Breathing heavily, she took a step back and wobbled. Sylvie took her by the elbow, and Ellie gave her an appreciative smile. “I’m okay. That was just a lot of mana. At least it’s the last one. How many is that, seven?”

“Yeah,” I answered, rubbing the back of my neck as I regarded my brave little sister. “Thank you, El. I know this all hasn’t been easy. This whole thing hinges on you—your magic. You know that, right? The fate of Dicathen is hanging by these threads of mana.”

“No pressure,” Regis said, lolling his tongue.

Ellie approached me, leaned forward, and wrapped her arms around me, her cheek pressed against my sternum. “You’re really going to just…sit down

here and meditate or whatever? For days? Weeks?”

“It could even be months,” Regis said helpfully, and Sylvie nudged him with her knee.

I wrapped my arms around Ellie and pulled her close. “Hopefully it’ll be done in a day and all of this preparation will have been for nothing.” I couldn’t quite put that hope into my tone, though. Not a day ago, word had come from Alaric in Alacrya, stating that there was a lot of strange movement amongst Agrona’s forces, only reinforcing my decision to take such involved steps to prepare.

I released her, and Ellie took a step back, staring deep into my eyes, her expression inscrutable. “Why does this feel so much like goodbye?” she asked.

Caught off guard, I stumbled for a response. It was Sylvie who, squeezing my sister from the side and smiling comfortingly, said, “That’s just the nerves talking. We’ll be back before you know it, I have no doubt. You have to believe me. I can see the future, remember?”

Ellie giggled and nuzzled into Sylvie’s shoulder.

“All right, all right, I have *earth-shatteringly important* things to do back in Vildorial,” Wren said gruffly. “Come on, girl, it’s time to get moving.”

I caught his eye and gave him a thankful nod, but he only scoffed in response.

Ellie walked backward as she made to follow Wren, who was already marching away. She waved, then turned and ran to catch up. In moments, they were out of the small chamber and ascending back through the tunnels. I waited, trailing them with my senses until they were well away, then turned to my companions.

“Come on,” I said, gesturing to Regis and Sylvie.

The journey to the refuge I’d prepared did not take long.

Inside, I kicked off my turnshoes and stepped down into the pool of glowing liquid. Withdrawing the keystone, I eased into a sitting position so

that the liquid came up to my stomach.

I stared down at the keystone's unremarkable form.

Sylvie waded into the pool beside me. Her clothes feathered across her body, shifting to become a tight-fitting, black-scaled fabric that covered her entire body from the neck down. She sat facing me. "We're with you, Arthur."

'Whether we like it or not,' Regis jibed from his place near my core.

Everything that could be done already had been. Dicathen's protectors stood ready to meet any challenge that might come from Agrona. All that remained for me…was to enter the keystone.

Aether flowed from my core and imbued the keystone, and my mind followed as it had so many times before with the other keystones.

A gentle application of Aroa's Requiem allowed me to approach the aetheric barrier, while Realmheart's vision guided me through the invisible pathways to the interior. For the first time, I faced the barrage of lightning-bolt-like memories with King's Gambit, which I activated immediately.

My thoughts, instead of being overwhelmed by the storm, easily absorbed, processed, and arranged the mental feedback and noise. As the static information was fitted into place—like puzzle pieces sliding together, or a key into a lock—the internal aetheric zone of the keystone melted away into utter darkness.

No, not absolute black. Because, in the distance, there was a glimmer of light. It was growing large as it approached—or as I approached it.

As if I were looking through a foggy window, everything around me turned into a bright blur, forcing me to shut my eyes. Indiscernible sounds assaulted my ears, making me dizzy. When I tried to speak, the words came out as a cry. The cacophony of indistinguishable sounds slowly mellowed, and I heard a muffled voice.

"Congratulations, sir and madam, he's a healthy boy."

36

A CAGE OF LIGHT

CECILIA

My impatience stung like nettles under my skin, but watching the surge of effort from the Instillers and their Wraith protectors was a balm to my nerves. The last two weeks had passed slowly and with increasing frustration, but it was finally time. Everything was in place within the Beast Glades. Although complicated by the dragons' increased patrols and taking over the flying castle hovering to the east, we were ready.

Under a shroud of mist that hid our signatures, swallowed the noise of our passage, and obscured us from view from above, my people moved into place.

There were at least fifty Instillers, Agrona's most trusted and knowledgeable servants, all carrying a plethora of dimensional storage devices. I flew above while they marched in jagged lines like so many ants below. Ten full battle groups of Wraiths flew around us, keeping to the cover of the drifting cloud of thick mist so their signatures wouldn't be noticed by any dragon guards.

I could neither see nor sense any dragons—not nearby, anyway. A patrol of guards was passing over the encampments built by the defeated Alacryan

soldiers to the north, and a few blurred together within the flying castle some way to the east.

Just above us, suspended in the sky a hundred feet or so over the trees, a very different sort of mana signature seemed to simmer just beneath the surface of what was normally detectable to the bare senses. There was no visual distortion, at least not from within our misty cloud and beneath the canopy of thin, half-dead trees.

It was fascinating, really. Although we'd been calling it a "rift," it was more like the mouth of a waterskin, and through it—within the waterskin—was all of Epheotus. The magic required to bend space in this way, forcing a piece of our world to bulge out into some other realm, was incomprehensible to me. But the mechanism by which it remained hidden, that I now understood.

The presence of the rift, or rather the intense pressure of the mana flowing into and then back out of it, caused distortions that rippled out for a hundred miles in every direction. When the inward flowing mana—which was being drawn into Epheotus—was balanced with the mana being projected back out of it by the asuras, that equilibrium disguised the rift's real location amid all that disturbance happening elsewhere. It required only a bit of effort on the dragons' part to bend the light so that there was no physical manifestation of this.

Once found, though, it was now impossible for me not to see. Neither Nico nor any of the Wraiths who had already been here could sense it, no matter how specific I was or how much they stared, but when I looked beneath the surface of what was shown, I saw the cyclone of mana, simultaneously being drawn in and expelled.

I indicated exactly where the rift was, and the Instillers got to work. Spreading out, they began to rapidly withdraw equipment from their dimension artifacts, assembling large devices in a circle around where the rift hovered high above. The mist spread as they did, creeping across the hard ground and between the crooked and dying trees that dominated this section of the Beast Glades, ensuring they remained obscured and undetectable.

As I watched the Instillers set about their work, I thought of Nico, hoping he would be safe. Dicathen's defenders had been busily scuttling into strongholds across the continent. As Agrona had anticipated, Grey seemed to have vanished, going underground, but the information from our spies was conflicting. Even his own people seemed convinced that Grey was in multiple places at once.

My lips curled into a sneer. As if Agrona would be fooled by such a weak attempt at a diversion.

The closest location was the Wall. As I waited, I expanded out my senses. It took time to go so far. The feedback was weak—a dim cluster of distant signatures. I could feel Nico and Dragoth, as well as a bright spark of mana that must have been a Lance. It was subtle, but beneath the undercurrent of everything else, there was a small distortion in the mana, like an opposing force pressing against it.

Grey and his dragon companion? I wondered, trying to parse what I was sensing. I'd tasted the dragon's mana, and there was a hint of it there, but it felt as if they were shrouding themselves somehow. *Surely it won't be so easy as that…*

My eyes snapped open and my thoughts wrenched back to my own task. The ring of artifacts was half in place. It was time.

First, I felt for the edges of the spell distorting light to wrap around the rift. Though powerful, it relied largely on the swell of magical energy to disguise its very presence. Once I had the spell in my grip, I dragged it aside like a curtain over a window. Unexpectedly, the spell resisted, as if there were someone standing on the other side holding it closed.

I pulled harder, and the spell ripped, pulling apart in a visible shower of pure mana. White light sparkled out in every direction to rain down on my people, and a sickening twist of mana seemed to churn the air inside my lungs.

The white sparks burned brighter, hotter, as they fell, and I realized the danger almost too late.

“Shields!” I shouted, waving my hands to conjure a protective barrier over the Wraiths and Instillers. Wherever the white sparks settled, they burned against the shield, mana crackling and popping against mana.

After a second of surprise, the Wraiths began to conjure their own barriers, buttressing mine against the intense potency of the falling sparks.

Above, the rift was now fully in view, a gash in the sky, the air seeming to fold around it at the edges, like flesh opened by a sharp blade. The sky beyond was a slightly different shade of blue, just alien enough to conjure gooseflesh along my arms and neck. Within the ripple in space, three distorted figures floated.

The Wraiths burst into action, four battle groups remaining at ground level and focusing purely on defending our Instillers, without whom everything would fail, while the other six broke and flew away, maneuvering around well outside the shower of sparks and flying high to encircle the rift.

I floated upward after them, moving the mana barrier with me and warping it to envelop the remnants of the strange burning-spark spell, the opposing forces grinding against one another like two tectonic plates. As the sparks failed and faded, the shield broke down, and I absorbed the remaining mana; it was tinged with a draconic attribute.

The three figures flew free of the rift, and the atmosphere—the very fabric of reality itself—seemed to tremble at their presence. Inside me, Tessia stirred in response. She was *afraid*.

They spoke as one, three voices echoing over and under and through each other. “This holy place is under the protection of Lord Kezess Indrath. To attack it—to affect it in any way—is sacrilege of the highest order. The punishment for your presence here is immediate death, reincarnate.”

I smirked up at them, enjoying the theatricality of it all. They were even dressed like they were in some kind of play and not on the field of battle, their ceremonial white robes gleaming with golden embroidery the same color as their golden hair. “The bravery of your words is only just a little bit spoiled by the fact you were cowering behind a spell to keep you hidden from me. You know who I am, but maybe you don’t know what I can do. If

you did, you would have turned around and flown right back where you came from."

Mana rippled the way it did around Arthur and his weapon, and the three dragons blinked away, appearing outside the ring of Wraiths. Their amethyst eyes lit from within, and violent purple beams of light blazed between them, creating a triangle around us all, with the rift at its center.

Panic surged up from deep within me, sudden and visceral and so *certain*. "Attack!" I screamed.

The sky transformed with dozens of spells as six Wraith battle groups unleashed their full offensive power on the three targets.

A cage of light spread from the beams of what could only be aether, spilling down to the ground and closing over our heads. The Wraiths' spells burst against the inside of the cage, sending soft waves undulating across its surface. The sound of hissing acid, crashing thunder, and blood iron shattering against the aether made my ears ring, and the smell of toxic water and scorched ozone burned my nostrils.

On the other side of the barrier, the three dragons seemed to be in a trance. They didn't blink or flinch as so many powerful spells crashed into their conjured barrier. Neither did they chant and gesture with arcane meaning. Except for the breeze blowing through their gleaming golden hair and white robes, and a subtle pulsing inside the brightness of their glowing purple eyes, they were motionless.

My heart hammered inside my chest as something clawed up at me from my guts. There was a feeling of *wrongness* within the cage, a sense of inevitable ruin. The Wraiths fought through it, but the Instillers on the ground had ceased their work, paralyzed by the oppressive force of the aetheric spell.

Something was growing inside the cage with us—an empty *nothingness*, like a hunger that couldn't be sated.

Reaching out with desperate claws of mana and pure force, I ripped and tore at the inside of the aetheric walls, willing the mana to dissipate the aether. It rippled forcefully, but it didn't break.

The Wraiths continued to bombard the walls as well, and I could sense my own desperation bleeding into them as they grew first uncertain and then panicked, but I struggled to rein myself in.

Abandoning my attacks, I grasped for the mana on the other side of the barrier, but I couldn’t reach it.

And still, the three dragons were cold and emotionless. No glint of victory reached their eyes, no grimace of strain bared their teeth. They were like three frustrating statues emanating their aetheric spell. Even as I thought this, though, all three sets of eyes shifted slightly, darkening as they focused on the rift. My own gaze was pulled slowly along behind theirs.

Black-purple light began to emanate from the rift, which was within the cage with us. The *something* that was being called, that I had felt from the instant the cage appeared, was coming through, closing in on us. I felt *hunger* gnawing at me, the bitter coldness of it gripping my bones in teeth of fear.

I stared into the void, conjured through the walls between the worlds to swallow us whole. It spilled from the rift like a dark cloud, like blood from a cut, like fetid breath from a rotting mouth.

Reaching out, I took hold of as much mana as I could and condensed it around the rift, a storm of ice and wind and shadow. The void consumed it, dragging the mana into itself, where it was snuffed out. And I suddenly understood. The void would spread throughout the cage, devouring all within. It was a trap from the beginning.

My fear gave way to anger and frustration. I slammed a wall of mana into the void, attempting to disrupt it or push it back into the rift, but the emptiness swallowed my mana, and my efforts only seemed to speed its growth.

I needed to subdue it, delay it—anything to give myself time to think. How did one stop *nothing*?

I vacillated rapidly between attacking the cage to break free or focusing on the growing black-purple darkness.

“You, you, and you, bombard the barrier! Focus on a single point—make a dent, a crack, anything!” I ordered, gesturing to three battle groups. “All the rest, hold your positions!” I finished, watching breathlessly as the cloud of purple-black nothing spilled down from above.

All the beautiful blues, greens, yellows, and reds of the atmospheric mana dissolved to colorless nothing as the cloud crept down the sky. Soon, there would be no mana left inside the aetheric cage with us at all, and then…

Knowing that I would need that mana, I pulled it away from the void, emptying the air around it of mana, matching it with a void of my own making.

Its progress seemed to slow, oozing left and right, spilling outward like a puddle, and I startled. It reminded me of nothing so much as a wild beast sniffing around for prey.

“Wrastor, take your battle group and circle around. Get above the emanation, above the rift,” I ordered.

The Wraith did not hesitate, snapping into motion as he and his brethren skirted around the edge of the darkness and disappeared from sight. But I could feel the signature they were giving off, and so, apparently, could the void, because its downward progress gusted to a halt while it began inching its way up toward the Wraiths, expanding as it did so, filling up every space it passed over.

The five Wraiths conjured barriers of protective mana around themselves so that they were wreathed in flame, shadow, and wind. I drew away the mana between them and the void cloud, but this time, it did not stop. They were too close, perhaps, their signatures too strong.

Tendrils of black-purple darkness reached for them, forcing them to fly up, but they were near the ceiling already. So close, the void seemed to be dragging the mana away from them, their shields spilling into it, the mana particles blowing off them like dandelion seeds before vanishing.

A tendril brushed against a Wraith’s foot, and the appendage dissolved, conjuring a surprised scream.

The mass of hungry emptiness sped toward the five Wraiths, spilling up into the sky above the portal.

“Everyone, focus on the walls there, there, and there!” I shouted urgently, pointing to the spots closest to the dragons.

As if breaking out of a trance, the other battle groups joined the first two I’d assigned to attack the walls, bombarding the aetheric barrier with every spell at their disposal as they released a colossal outpouring of destructive mana. Blood iron, soulfire, void wind, and bile water-attribute spells struck, hammered, splashed, and sliced the walls containing us, all targeting those three narrow points.

But my thoughts were condensing too slowly. There was only so much mana in this small slice of ground—only so much in me—and the void cloud was consuming it rapidly.

Cursing under my breath, I wished suddenly that Nico was there. He was the smart one, the one with the plans. He would have some clever idea, some way to turn the void against them…

Outside, the three dragons remained in their trance, apparently concentrating all their effort on maintaining their spells.

The dark cloud spread above us, cutting off the five Wraiths. The wounded woman attempted to fly around it and rejoin us, but the void moved with her. She tried to reverse course, but too late. With a truncated scream, it consumed her, leaving nothing behind but more emptiness.

In doing so, it brushed against the outer walls. When the first tendril of the moving void touched the aether of our cage, the vibrant purple energy shimmered, trembling outward across the entire surface of the vast magical structure, and the void recoiled, drawn toward the four remaining Wraiths instead.

Outside our cage, the dragons shifted for the first time, a trembling tension shared between the three, as if concentrating on their spells had just become that much more difficult.

It was confirmation enough.

Grasping the mana around the four Wraiths, I plunged it like a tether into the gnawing emptiness. As I'd expected, it took in the mana hungrily, drawn naturally upward to fill the space above the rift. One by one, Wrastor and the rest of his team vanished within it. With the void suddenly expanding rapidly, it couldn't help but press against the walls and ceiling, sending crackling waves of energy rippling across the outside of the towering pillar of purple light that entrapped us.

One of the dragons shouted in dismay.

"Ready your spells!" I screamed, my voice cracking with fear and anticipation.

The remaining Wraiths paused in their assault, focusing instead on the dragons as they waited, buzzing with tension and magic.

Sweat trickled down the dragons' brows, and their statuesque stillness gave way to geriatric quivering.

What I had learned about dragon aether arts returned to me through the fog of war. They did not control aether in the same way I controlled mana, only coaxed it to do as they wished. This spell was incredibly powerful, so much so that it took three of them to conjure it. And the void…whatever dark arts they used to summon it, surely their control over it was limited. I could see that in their strained and fearful expressions through the transparent walls of aether.

This was an act of desperation. They were pushing themselves and their magic to the edge of their control to destroy me.

Even as I realized what I needed to do, the darkness began descending yet again, creeping into the emptiness I had conjured between us and it.

The atmosphere at the bottom of our cage was thick with all the mana that I'd transplanted to create that barrier. Now, I took hold of it, pulling it all close to me. Some of the Instillers and Wraiths cried out as they felt the mana go, but I had no time to explain.

When all that condensed mana of the area directly around the rift was forced together like a hot white soup sloshing in the air around me, I took a long, shaking breath. With one last glance at where the void crackled and

dragged across the aetheric walls, I hurled the mana upward, forcing it as far and as fast as I could.

The living darkness of the void took it in greedily, absorbing and unmaking all the mana I could give it. It swelled and seethed, growing rapidly, surging down toward us and pressing against the barriers constraining it, dark tendrils digging into the aetheric walls. Like ice freezing in the cracks between cobblestones, the void expanded.

There was no explosion, no fireworks, not even a noise. One moment the cage surrounded us, the next it simply dissolved into purple mist and then to nothing at all, and the void lost form and shape, like a wisp of cloud quickly blown away.

The dragon to my left sagged under the backlash of the spell's failure and could do nothing to defend himself as the Wraiths' spells converged on him. As ancient and powerful as he perhaps was, he was still flesh and bone, and under the rain of destructive magic, his skin broke open, his bones shattered and turned to dust, and only very little of him at all remained to tumble like a wingless bird into the Beast Glades below.

Despite a sudden punishing fatigue that made my arms feel like lead and my skull pulse with each desperate beat of my heart, I rushed to take hold of the mana around the dragon to my right and ripped it away, creating a pocket of empty space around him. His eyes rolled back into his head as he struggled to keep hold of his own mana, fighting back at my control and slinging out wild spells.

A gout of silver fire scorched the air between us, and I intercepted it with a gleaming shield, my body aching with the effort. Burning whips cracked around the shield's edges, emanating from the silver flames, and I severed them with conjured blades. The flames combusted, launching apart in several smaller fireballs that all dropped like catapult stones toward the Instillers still struggling to set up the equipment below. The flames flagged and withered to nothing as I fought to cancel out the spell, releasing the mana back into the atmosphere.

From the corner of my eye, I saw spells flying at the other surviving dragon, but dozens of interlocking plates of bright violet energy appeared

around her, moving smoothly past each other like the cogs of a complex watch to catch the Wraiths' attacks and diffuse them, never taking the full brunt of so many spells on any single plate.

The dragon whose mana I had forced away was struggling to stay upright, but my arms still trembled as I deflected his spells. We sat in equilibrium for a moment, both red-faced and sweating, his pure mana flashing between us with each attack. I bided my time, just for a moment, trying to catch my breath and still my quivering muscles.

Each attack was weaker and slower, until I was able to reach out and snuff a bolt of pure mana on the dragon's very fingertips. With a wary, desperate moan, I clenched my fist, and around him, the mana I'd pulled aside surged back in, crushing his unprotected body like an insect between my fingers, and then his corpse also plunged from the sky.

Mana moved behind me—not condensing into a spell but being brushed out of the way of one—and I dodged just as a short spear of aether thrust at the base of my neck. The blow, viper-strike quick, nicked the top of my shoulder, drawing a hot line of pain and blood.

Elsewhere, dozens of other spears appeared out of thin air at the same moment, and several of my Wraiths cried out simultaneously as aether pierced their cores.

Cursing, I barely dodged another attack, then a third, unable to strike back or assist the others as spear after spear formed and stabbed, each one coming from a different direction as they attempted to anticipate and intercept my rushed, uncalculating movements.

Remembering my battle with Arthur, I wrapped my hands in mana and feinted an off-course, lurching dodge away from one spear. When I felt the shifting of the air and mana that indicated a new spear forming, I grabbed it with both hands even before it could launch itself at my throat. Mana swelled into my arms, shoulders, and chest, my physical strength surging, and I spun through the air.

Before a new spear could manifest, I launched the one in my hands, wrapping my own mana around it. It flew like the bullet of an old Earth firearm, almost too fast to see with the naked eye. When it struck the

spinning mechanism of clockwork magic plates, the aether spear shattered one small shield before slamming into the woman’s stomach. Her body lurched backward, colliding with her own spell, which battered her back and forth several times before both the spear and shields faded.

She fell in slow motion, still conscious enough to channel her magic but lacking the strength or wherewithal to keep herself aloft or prepare new defenses.

Or so I thought.

In the moment of hesitation that followed, the Wraiths all looking to me for orders, the woman launched herself toward the rift, becoming little more than a streak of white and gold as her body expanded rapidly outward, wings sprouting from her back, scales growing over her flesh, her neck shooting forward as it elongated.

Pushing off against the mana as if it were a wall, I hurled myself into her path.

The enormous dragon’s neck twisted around, glowing amethyst eyes alight with fear and fury. She bared teeth as long as swords and snapped at me.

Gravity increased so quickly and with such enormous pressure that the reptilian jaws snapped shut again, teeth breaking and embedding themselves into the flesh of her mouth. Her wings bent awkwardly, the membranes tearing and the light bones snapping like twigs. All her forward momentum was absorbed by the gravity, and she tumbled back the way she had come. Not straight down, which would have damaged the equipment, but at a slight angle. When she hit the ground, several Instillers fell as well, the shockwave of her impact digging a hundred-foot-long trench into the hard-packed ground and obscuring her in a cloud of dust.

The surviving Wraiths, each one with a spell burning in their hands, arranged themselves around the dust, prepared to eviscerate the dragon at any sign of movement.

But I could feel her struggle, see the weak effort of her mana to push back against the gravity well. Under the cover of the dust, I saw her outline in mana shrinking, resuming her humanoid form. Unhurried, I drifted down

into the dust. A breeze blew around me, pushing the dust away to reveal, lying at the bottom of a huge crater, the final surviving asura.

I wondered, very briefly, who these three had been. How long had they labored to learn the aether arts they had performed today? I could only imagine the heights of their presumptuous arrogance as they accepted the task their lord gave them…and the depth of their regret and despair as they realized that they'd failed.

The woman coughed up blood, her body spasming with pain, then relaxed, unfurling across the ground to stare up at me. The weight of millennia settled on me beneath her gaze. *All that life…and I have undone it.* This thought was met with pride and confidence, but also…something deeper and harder to identify.

I shook it off and knelt beside the dragon. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed with difficulty. I thought perhaps she would say something, beg me for life or admonish me for my service to Agrona, but she was silent.

Reaching out, I gripped her mana and began to siphon it away from her, absorbing it fully. Arthur's companion had only given me a taste, but it hadn't been enough to really gain a sense of the dragons' magic and abilities. I needed that insight in order to more fully counter their mana arts.

She fought me—she could hardly do anything else, I imagined. It was instinct, like clawing at hands wrapped around her throat. But she was too far gone, and her efforts were feeble.

I braced myself for whatever might come with the mana, afraid but also tantalized by the opportunity to see her memories. However, it seemed as if that part of the process was something unique to the phoenixes—or, I realized somewhat uncomfortably, perhaps even a purposeful effect by Dawn in the moments of her death—because all I experienced was the power itself.

The particular aspect of dragon mana—*pure* mana—unfolded in my mind. No lesser core had ever clarified mana so brilliantly, even my own. It shone like snowflakes on a cold, bright midwinter morning. In some ways, it was the opposite of basilisk mana, which was dark and twisted, resulting in their

decay-type mana arts—or perhaps *because* of them. I breathed it in, reveling in the energy and power that suffused me.

The asuran woman shivered, her flesh collapsing inward as the mana-suffused tissue beneath it was wrung out. Her eyes faded to a pale lavender, her skin grayed, and her hair thinned. Her handsome beauty, like her strength, left her. And then…she was dead.

I sucked in a deep, fortifying breath, the infusion of draconic mana crackling in my muscles and behind my eyes, undoing some of my fatigue.

And then my eyes snapped open as I felt the distant movement of similar mana signatures. Similar, but less, I noted. None of the dragons I could sense had the strength of these three, but eight—*no, ten*—dragon mana signatures were approaching rapidly from the north and the east.

“Quickly, complete the arrays!” I snapped, shooting up into the air.

Below me, the Instillers hurriedly continued the process of setting up the equipment. I scanned the horizon, but the dragons were still too far off to see. *Can the remaining Wraiths and I hold off so many?* I asked myself, but I knew the answer. It had never been the plan for me to fight all the dragons in Dicathen at once.

As I watched the Instillers finish their work, my mind turned inward. Frustration flared as the adrenaline of battle wore off and I was able to consider the fight that had unfolded. That the dragons would be protecting the portal was obvious, but that spell, or combination of spells, or whatever the hell the dragons had been doing…

My fists clenched, and the mana around me warped outward. I knew I couldn’t have escaped this trap on my own. Without the Wraiths, without Wrastor’s team’s sacrifice, I would have been dissolved within that void, everything that made me *me* just *gone*.

Bile rose up the back of my throat, and I tried to push the frustration—the cold and sickening *rage*—back down deep. I was *the Legacy*. I couldn’t just…lose—just die. *And I shouldn’t need* anyone *to save me*, I thought desperately.

Needing something else—anything else—to focus on, I turned my smoldering ire on Tessia, who had been silent throughout the battle, but whom I had felt writhe in disgust as I drained the dragon dry.

No scolding, princess? I asked bitterly. *Aren't you going to tell me what a terrible person I am? How evil and irredeemable? How blind?*

'It appears there is nothing left for me to say that you don't already know,' she replied, her voice dim, distant, and empty of emotion.

I scoffed but couldn't come up with a reply. I wanted to argue with her, to fight her. I needed to defend myself, to make someone understand.

Clenching my jaw, I tried to shake off the childish impulse. There was nothing to defend. I was doing my job, what I had to do. That was all.

Below me, the last of the devices was assembled, and the power emitters—like antennas that collected and stored atmospheric mana—were being placed and connected.

Struggling to be in the moment, I did the mental math. The Instillers were working too slowly.

On the horizon, I could now make out five dots growing quickly larger from the east.

Cursing, I dropped to the ground. The array was all connected together, it just lacked the power it needed. Steadying myself, I pressed both hands against the first of the mana crystals. I envisioned mana traveling through me, then through all the wires and cables, filling each device and letting it fulfill its purpose.

Thought became reality, and the huge circle of artifacts began to hum with energy, each one emitting at first only a soft glow. This light radiated outward, slowly at first but with building speed and intensity until, with a sudden rush of mana, a dome of protective force curved over us to surround the rift, cutting it, and us, off from the outside world.

Only moments later, a missile of pure mana crashed against the side of the dome, which trembled under the force. I pushed more mana, and then more still, thankfully swelling with it from absorbing the dragon. Another spell,

and then another, collided rapidly with the barrier. Cracks ran across its surface, and the shield emitters began to whine.

“Get the rest of this mana battery up and running,” I said in a low, strained voice. There was a frozen moment where no one reacted. When my gaze swept over them a second later, the Instillers jumped and hurried to comply as more spells impacted the side of the dome.

I needed more power—more *mana*—to rapidly bring the emitters up to their full capacity. If only we’d had just five more minutes!

My searching gaze settled on the rift above me. Little mana was being drawn into it now, but a significant amount was still pouring out. Tethering myself to the crystal with mana, I launched myself off the ground and flew into the middle of the distortion, not quite entering the rift but floating in that same in-between space the dragons had occupied before the attack. There, I drank deeply from the wellspring of that mana, but I did not hold it within myself to be purified. Instead, I pressed it downward through the tether and into the array, which pulsed with energy as the projected shield surged and thickened, visible ripples of light pulsing along its surface to collide at the very top.

The dragons arrived, their spells and breath and claws battering the barrier.

I grinned, relief draining the fear out of me. The shield held.

NICO SEVER

I fidgeted as I watched the light show happening to the east. It was too far for me to know if it was working or not. Although the shielding technology had been designed by Sovereign Orlaeth to hold back High Sovereign Agrona, and I had seen it stop even Cecilia from breaking through, it still seemed like it was asking a lot for it to hold up under constant attack by who knows how many dragons.

And then there was the disruption technology we’d developed based on the prototypes Seris left behind in the Relictombs. With it, we would interrupt the ability to travel through the rift so Lord Indrath couldn’t send dragons through from the other side. Like Seris had done on the second level of the Relictombs, we would cut the two worlds off from one another.

“Are we doing this or what?” Dragoth asked, scowling as he loomed over me.

The rift was Cecilia’s task to complete. I had my own.

“The other teams have confirmed everything is in place?” I asked, more to get my head back in the process than because I was worried they hadn’t.

One of the handful of Instillers who accompanied us snapped out a nervous, “Yes, sir.”

I checked my timekeeping artifact, which had been synced with several other Wraith teams now spread out across Dicathen. “Power up the teleportation frame.”

The Instillers began activating the twenty-foot-wide teleportation frame. I watched them with a mix of trepidation and pride; it was an artifact of my own design.

While Cecilia had been searching for the rift, I was scouring dungeons in the deepest parts of the Beast Glades in search of a complete djinn teleportation relic. The long-distance portals they developed still held up and were used throughout Dicathen and, to a lesser extent, Alacrya. They could even reach from one continent to the other, as they had been used during the war.

But Agrona’s Instillers had never learned to replicate them. *I* figured it out.

The frame emitted a low hum, then a curtain of energy spilled down within the large open rectangle. I checked the timekeeping artifact again. “Complete the link.”

The lead Instiller programmed in the directions to a portal frame in Alacrya. The mana shifted, gaining clarity. A moment later, it rippled, and a row of soldiers stepped through. Behind them, another row stepped through, and then another. I knew that our forces were pouring out of identical portals all across Dicathen, set up by teams of Wraiths moving near-invisibly.

Apprehension filled me.

Despite the effort that went into this moment just to allow these soldiers to step foot on Dicathian soil, I knew it was the easy part. As rank after rank of men filed through, I steeled myself for what was to come.

"*No stone unturned, no village unburned*." Those had been Agrona's words.

Clearing my throat, I turned toward the Wall, less than a half-mile distant. *And so begins the second invasion of Dicathen…*

"Dragoth, you know what to do."

37

THE ORDER

SETH MILVIEW

It was a cloudy day, a good day for a fight. Deep red clouds hung low overhead as if they were laden with blood about to spill over us. *Is it my blood, though, or my enemies'?* I wondered idly, hand clenched around the hilt of my blade.

"Se-eth! Se-eth! Se-eth!" the crowd chanted, my name becoming two syllables as they roared it loud enough to shake the soil beneath my feet.

I looked across the battlefield at my opponent. Her thin and bedraggled hair hung down over her drowned-pale and puffy flesh, a tinge of green to it. She looked like she'd wrapped herself in an old bed sheet, or maybe a curtain, instead of clothes. Sickly waves of poisonous mana wafted off her, but I didn't mind.

I wasn't scared. Not even a bit. I couldn't quite escape the feeling that I *should* be, but with my sword in my hand and my name in the air like thunder, it was impossible to be afraid of *anything*.

Giving Bivrae of the Dead Three a winning smirk, I sauntered forward. Only…my feet didn't move. It was as if I were rooted to the ground, stuck fast. My hand grasped the hilt of my sword, which was in its sheath, but the blade wouldn't come free. I tugged and tugged, but it was futile. Then,

suddenly and with undeniable certainty, I understood that I was going to die.

My body was frozen as the nightmare woman scuttled across the stadium floor toward me. I tried to shout, but the noise choked off in my own throat. Mana swelled in the atmosphere, building and building until—

I jolted upright, blinking rapidly against the sweat stinging my eyes. Groggily, I looked around, struggling to make sense of what I was seeing.

The dimly lit interior of a simple one-room dwelling opened to an outside shaded by twilight.

I jumped off the rough cot and grabbed my turnshoes, slipping them on and hurrying to the door. “Seth, you fool, you fell asleep!” It had been a long couple of weeks—maybe a bit more, I couldn’t be quite sure—since the Sovereign’s appearance and the attack. I’d only meant to lie down and shut my eyes for a minute, but…

Glancing westward, the sun had already gone beyond the distant mountains. I’d slept away the entire afternoon!

As I looked around for Lyra Dreide, a deep frown worked its way onto my face. Something was wrong. Everyone had stopped, and they were staring south. My own gaze followed theirs, and I suddenly felt it: mana, so much mana that I could hardly make sense of it. It swooned and swelled, battering back and forth, casting a distant pink glow against the twilight sky.

“Vritra’s horns, but it can’t be a battle,” a young woman I didn’t know said from a few feet to my right. Sensing my gaze, she met my eye. The color had drained from her face. “What kind of battle could cause such a…a…” Her words trailed off as she struggled even to think of an appropriate description for the sensation.

Then we all, as one, ducked or flinched, cries echoing across the encampment as a shadow fell over us, dim in the wan light. Looking up in fright, I watched as two huge, winged reptilian beasts flew by overhead, leaving the encampment behind in a moment as they sliced through the air toward the distant battle.

I swallowed heavily and unrooted my feet, an echo of my nightmare momentarily quickening my pulse. I needed to find Lyra or Lady Seris!

As I burst into a run, the unmoving scene around me unfroze as well, and people hurried to find their blood—their families—with a few others shouting out for leadership, and some eagerly grouping up to discuss the event. More than one, I noticed uncomfortably, watched the southern treeline with hungry expressions that seemed out of place with everyone else's fear.

I hadn't run far when Lyra Dreide strode around the corner of a larger family-sized building, her brows knit, her expression intense as she watched the dragons melt away into distant dots before being hidden by the horizon.

"Lady Lyra, something's happening," I said breathlessly. "A battle…in the Beast Glades."

Her red eyes settled on me, and a strange expression softened her features. Goosebumps rose along my arms and neck, and I took a step back.

"Come with me, Seth," she said, her voice soft, a kind of…ache half hidden within it. Without waiting for me, she walked past, heading for the southern edge of the encampment.

There, we found most of the villagers—those who stayed there permanently and a large number who were only there for a couple of days to help build a few new houses—already gathered, and they were almost all still staring south. Many turned to watch us, and a few called out in response to Lyra's appearance.

"Retainer Lyra!"

"What is it, what's happening?"

"A dragon! I saw a dragon!"

"High Sovereign Agrona has finally come!"

The crowd went silent, and all eyes turned to the young soldier who had shouted this. She seemed to realize her error immediately and shrank under so much attention—most of it clearly hostile.

“Please, I must urge you all to be calm,” Lyra said, her voice projecting across the small town so it sounded to each person as if she were standing right next to them. “Do or say nothing now that you may regret in an hour's time. We must trust that the dragons are protecting us as they’ve agreed, until such a time that we are given reason not to.”

“Where is Lady Seris?” a man with short black hair and a slightly ragged beard asked, stepping forward out of the crowd. “Surely she would have more to tell us than that!”

“Sulla,” Lyra said, placatingly. “I understand your fear, but regardless of what is happening to the south, we cannot panic.”

“I’m not suggesting we panic, but perhaps we should do *something* besides sit here and wait to be saved,” he shot back.

I glanced between them rapidly, momentarily stunned by his attitude before remembering that Lyra wasn’t a retainer anymore, just as Seris wasn’t a Scythe. They had made themselves our equals, but that didn’t stop most of us from looking at them as our leaders. In Alacrya, she probably would have flayed the skin from his bones without a thought, but then, that was exactly what we’d worked so hard to escape.

“If it seems as if danger is—”

I fell to my knees as the world trembled. The skin of my back burned as if I’d been branded, and a presence—a consciousness not my own wrapped in a sheath of *power*—clawed into the space just behind my eyes. I tried to look around and see if it was just me, unsure if it would be better that way or not, but I couldn’t focus, could hardly see, as if a thick gray woolen blanket had been pulled over my eyes.

And then I heard the voice, and I knew it *wasn’t* just me, because all around me, people screamed. The rumbling baritone made my bones quiver with desperation, like my skeleton wanted to rip its way out of me and run away. Even if I’d never heard that voice before in my life, I’d have known right away who it was.

“Children of the Vritra,” it began, rumbling so I couldn’t tell if it was in my head or booming out of the air itself, *“you have waited. You have bided*

your time so very patiently, and now your long wait is at its end."

My vision slowly returned, and I saw dozens of other Alacryans in the same position as me. *As if I'd been forced to kneel before the High Sovereign himself,* I thought wildly. A few had stayed standing, swaying on their feet or leaning against a wall or fence, but only Lyra seemed physically unaffected. The way she focused into the middle distance, staring blindly at nothing at all, was enough to tell me that she, too, could hear the voice.

"The time has come. The war begins anew, and you will be the edge of the blade that will slit your dragon overlords' throats. You will lift up arms once again, and your subjugators will become but dust and blood trod into the road on your way to victory. It begins with the one who put you here, who stole your strength and your freedom."

Without looking at me, Lyra's hand took hold of my shirt and lifted me uncomfortably back to my feet. It stayed there, clenched into the fabric, as the color drained from her face.

"Find Arthur Leywin. Find the Lance they presumptuously call Godspell and bring him to me. Alive if you can, but his core will suffice just as well."

Like a stone falling from the sky, a figure slammed into the ground nearby, pearl hair fluttering around her horns before falling back down over her black battlerobes. Seris's dark eyes tracked over the crowd, settling on Lyra. She looked grim.

"Do not refuse me."

I flinched so bad I might have fallen if not for Lyra's grip as the same man from before shouted into the sky. "But I do refuse!" His voice cut across the stillness like the noise of a sword clashing against a shield, then hung there uncomfortably.

"Sulla, be silent!" Seris hissed, taking a step toward him and waving for him to settle down.

Instead, he took a few steps out into the open and turned to look at everyone else. "I don't know what magic this is, but he's just trying to scare us! Pick up our blades and go to war? Most of us did everything we could to escape

our eternal service to the Vritra! We risked our lives! Fight for him now? No. No, I don't think so."

I caught sight of Enola pushing her way forward, her face set, clearly ready to join him, but her grandfather took her by the wrist and jerked her back, scolding her so viciously that even my dauntless classmate paled and was silent in response.

But others did come forward to stand at Sulla's side. I recognized them all, even if I didn't know them individually. Most were those who had fought alongside Seris in Alacrya as part of her rebellion, but a few I knew had been soldiers. Among them was the Sentry, Baldur Vassere. I knew him pretty well, as he'd worked closely with Lyra, having become a de facto leader among the soldiers when Professor Grey—*Arthur,* I reminded myself — tasked Baldur with rounding up the troops after the route at Blackbend City.

"Lauden, *no*!" a woman hissed, dragging my confused gaze through the crowd to where a man was pushing away from an older couple—clearly his parents, as he looked just like them—and striding proudly to join the growing crowd.

"Please, mother. We've come this far. Haven't we already given up every shred of power the Denoir name once carried? Abyss take us, but it was right, wasn't it?" He clapped Sulla on the shoulder. "I won't recant now."

Lauden Denoir. Lady Caera's brother, I acknowledged dimly, my thoughts refusing to come into focus. My brain felt like it was being compressed within my skull.

"Stop! Be still, be silent," Seris commanded, suddenly shrill, a panic growing in her that I'd never seen before. Beside me, Lyra was tense, the hand clutching my shirt trembling.

"Lady Seris, we all swore ourselves to your cause back in Alacrya," Sulla said. "I won't cow before Agrona now, and not ever again. Not when I—I…" Sweat was pouring down his face, and he grimaced as words seemed to fail him. One hand began scratching at his back, and a growing terror fell across his features. Suddenly he was clawing at himself, moaning low in the back of his throat. All those nearby stepped back, aghast.

With wide, horrified eyes, he looked at Seris, but she was shaking her head. “I’m sorry, Sulla. All of you. I’m so sorry.”

His shirt, which covered his runes, was smoking, a glow emanating through the cloth. As it lit on fire, burning outward from his spine, he fell to his knees and screamed. A sudden burst of black-tinged wind lifted him off the ground, spun him around, and slammed him back into the soil. Blades of wind and fire sprouted from him, spraying blood in a halo around him, then spun, eviscerating his body and silencing his agonized screeching.

Too late, I turned away and closed my eyes.

“Still your minds!” Seris shouted, both hands pressing down into the air around her as if she could smother the growing terror. “Do not answer him! Not aloud, not in your own thoughts, keep—”

Someone else cried out, and I couldn’t help but look. One of those who’d joined Sulla was engulfed in blue flames, their skin blackening and their eyes turning to jelly as they clawed at the ground.

The crowd screamed as one and pulled back yet further from the small cluster of those who had been brave enough to stand up and shout out their denial of Agrona’s commands.

Terrified, I tried to do as Seris ordered, smothering my own thoughts. Without meaning to, I inched closer to Lyra, and her arm wrapped around my shoulder, pulling me close.

But my eyes fixed on one person. Lady Caera’s brother, Lauden, was stumbling back from the crimson stain that had been the man, Sulla. He was smeared with Sulla’s blood, but his face was blank, confused. I thought distantly that my own face must look pretty much the same.

Beside him, another person began to die, their runes igniting and their own spells ripping them apart from the inside. Lauden’s eyes pierced through the crowd to find his mother and father. The woman was weeping openly, pleading with her husband as he held her back from running to her son.

My stomach clenched, wriggling sickeningly inside me, but no matter how much I wanted to look away, I just couldn’t. I *couldn’t*.

And so I watched, wreathed in the unexpected comfort of Lyra Dreide's arm, as Lauden Denoir's runes burst, their energy burning away his shirt and the skin of his back. Mana spilled out of him like blood from a butchered wogart, bubbling up from his lungs and out his nose and mouth as he choked and drowned in it. A vein in his neck burst, spraying outward, then another, and then…and then I did look away, in the end.

For a moment, I was afraid that the same thing was happening to me, but when I retched, only bile and my mostly digested lunch came up, spattering the ground and my shoes.

"I gave you the power you wield, and it is mine. Work against me in action, word, or even in thought, and the magic that was my gift to you will become your bane. These first brave few, for acting as my example to you, have spared their bloods from the same fate, but any others who disobey condemn their mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters to share their painful and gruesome end."

The voice went silent, but the clutching *presence* still pressed against my lower spine. As I wiped my mouth, I looked up, back into the village, and met a pair of laughing red eyes.

Standing as if petrified, with my sleeve half-dragged across my lips and my back hunched as I attempted to straighten, I stared at the Wraith, Perhata. The woman who had subdued a *Sovereign*.

Perhaps sensing my distress, Lyra turned as well, sucking in a sharp breath as she noticed the woman. "Scythe Seris!" she called urgently, accidentally slipping into the habit of using her old title.

The entire crowd dragged their gazes away from the smoldering remains of those who had died, and then as one flinched back as they saw the Wraith lurking behind them, her lips curved into a smirk, her stance and expression both relaxed, almost lazy. The energy of that moment tingled beneath my skin, raising the hair on the back of my neck. I couldn't recall ever experiencing such fear.

Then Seris was beside me. Her fingers brushed my shoulder, and it was like she released me from some spell. I jolted upright and took a couple of steps back, splashing in my own sick as I sought to hide behind Lyra like a child.

“I told you,” Perhata said, singsong. She took a bouncing step forward, her deep red eyes jumping from Seris to the corpses and then back again. “These are *Agrona’s* soldiers, understand? And the time has come that the High Sovereign is ready to make use of them. The order has been given, and you will march, as I said before. Or…” Her smile sharpened, like a dagger being drawn over a whetstone. “Lead them elsewhere, Seris. Tell them to refuse, to stay here, to do anything except exactly what he commands. You know what will happen.”

I stared at Seris, knowing she had to have some way around this. She *had* to! Otherwise, what had it all been for?

Beside me, Lyra shifted. “Lady Seris—”

Seris’s hand snapped up, fast as a whip, and she half turned to look past Lyra to all the others gathered there, then off to the east and west, no doubt thinking of the thousands upon thousands of Alacryans in the other encampments. *Did they all experience the same thing?* I wondered somewhere in the back of my mind.

Finally, Seris spoke. “Gather what weapons and armor we have. We…we march to war.”

CAERA DENOIR

Alice set down a bowl of mushroom stew, still steaming and giving off a rich, meaty scent, and nudged the plate of fresh-baked biscuits closer to me. “Please, eat up, dear. You and Ellie have both been training so hard, I worry about you.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, but it was a sound of appreciation and wonder more than amusement. “Thank you, this smells wonderful.”

And it did, too. It was strange, that such a simple meal could seem so… complete and *complex* and…homey. I’d grown up with private chefs who were happy to prepare an entirely separate meal for each member of my family, but it had been a long time since something as simple as a meal had felt special like this one.

Ellie laughed too, slurping down a spoonful of her own stew, her focus somewhere deep below us. “Speaking of, did you see Gideon today? He

burned off his eyebrows again!” She giggled and sprayed stew on the table, which only made her laugh more as Alice glowered at her.

“I know, the poor man,” I said, hiding my own smile behind a spoon-filled hand. “And he was doing so well, too.”

Alice tried to smile as she tossed a towel at Ellie to clean up her mess, but she didn’t seem entirely focused on the moment, and I thought I could guess why. I didn’t pry, however, and instead took up a spoonful of my dinner, blowing gently on the broth to cool it.

“I hope Arthur is all right,” she said, inviting us into her thoughts anyway.

I set the spoon back into the bowl without tasting the stew, then met her eye. She returned the look only for a moment before her eyes darted away again, and I felt a squirming guilt within me. I hadn’t told Ellie or Alice about my conversation with Arthur yet. He’d be upset to know Ellie had invited me for dinner…although perhaps more so that I’d accepted. Perhaps it had been a moment of rebelliousness, or…

No, I told myself chidingly. *You were lonely, and you accepted a moment of kindness even if you shouldn’t have, that is all.*

“No one is more capable of facing whatever is to come than Arthur,” I said aloud. When Alice met my eye again, it was my turn to look away, hurrying to stuff a spoonful of stew into my mouth and instantly regretting it as the sensitive tissue of my tongue burned. “Hah,” I breathed out, searching for a change of subject. “Anyway, I was surprised when Ellie asked me to dinner. I thought Arthur would have you two hidden away in a vault somewhere,” I said, only half teasing.

“Windsom was supposed to come get us today, but so far he’s nowhere to be found,” Ellie explained, acting as if it wasn’t a big deal. Her brother, I expected, would very much disagree.

“I just…” Alice sighed deeply and pushed her own bowl away before continuing with her previous thought as if it hadn’t been interrupted. “I know he has Sylvie and Regis, but they’re…well, they’re as much a part of him as his own thoughts, you know? I worry about him being *lonely*.”

The word caught me off guard, like an echo of my own thoughts from just a minute earlier. I cleared my throat and dabbed at my lips with a napkin, unsure how to respond.

“It’s just that the world has put him up on this pedestal.” Alice stared, unseeing, at the curling steam slowly wafting off my bowl. “And he’s so high up there, and with no one to keep him company. No one who understands him, who can offer him companionship. Not really.”

I mulled over her words, thinking if I—or anyone, for that matter—could be that companion. *Or was I just one of the many looking up at him on that pedestal?*

After a beat of silence, I opened my mouth to offer her words of consolation that I hadn’t decided on yet, but all that came out was a ragged gasp. A warmth spread out from my runes, and my mana seemed to gust and swell, only half controlled.

And then I heard the voice, unguent and violating. *“Children of the Vritra, you have waited. You have bided your time so very patiently, and now your long wait is at its end.”*

My eyes flew open, and I stared in horror at Alice and Ellie. They both stared back, reflecting only growing confusion. Pushing my chair away from the table, I stumbled toward the door into the sitting chamber, but as the voice grew in strength, my control seemed to weaken, and I barely made it to the opening before I collapsed against the frame, looking across space as if I were seeing Agrona’s face in a projection, his sneering, smirking visage looking down on me as he continued, explaining everything.

“No—no, that’s not possible. I won’t—can’t!” I gasped, lunging toward the front door.

A bulky brown shape appeared before me, and I bounced off the furry wall, collapsing onto my rear, only half understanding. The bearish creature let out a low, dangerous growl as he loomed above me.

“Boo!” Ellie shouted, horrified. “What are you—”

“Find Arthur Leywin. Find the Lance they presumptuously call Godspell and bring him to me. Alive if you can, but his core will suffice just as well.

Do not refuse me.”

“Arthur…” I moaned. He *knew*, but how? How could he have foreseen *this*? “I have to get—get out of here,” I said, staring up into dark, wet, beady eyes. “But I won’t do that. I won’t. I *refuse*. I’d rather die.”

“C-Caera?” Ellie stammered, hovering above and behind me. I could almost feel her hands extended toward me, frozen just out of reach. “Wh-what’s going on?”

Through clenched teeth, I tried to explain, but a sudden surge of pain and power from my runes split the words into a scream. I threw myself on my back, writhing. Alice grabbed Ellie and pulled her away, and Boo roared and leapt over me, putting himself between the Leywins and my body.

My body…but was it, even? Or did my Vritra blood make it *Agrona’s* body? Was it even a body, now? Or had he turned me into a weapon, a bomb? And I had planted myself exactly where I shouldn’t be. I’d have cursed if I could have gotten a word out through the pain.

My mind flashed for just as second to my adoptive blood, and I hoped beyond hope that they were okay, but even that thought was swallowed as wind began gusting around me, turning my body half about and then lifting me up and slamming me against the wall. Heavy paws pinned me to the floor, teeth bared in my face. I felt a blade of wind cut a line across my cheek.

“Run!” I gasped, ragged and desperate. “P-please, you have to—”

Small hands grasped mine, and I looked over to see Ellie kneeling next to me, tears spilling unnoticed down her cheeks.

“Agrona—he knows—searching for Arthur—using the Alacryans already in Dicathen…” I stammered, struggling to get each word out. “My runes—using my runes…”

Ellie’s presence was like a cooling balm against my burning skin, but even as I looked at her, a blade of wind slashed across her forearm. She winced, and I tried to pull free, but I lacked the strength.

I closed my eyes, feeling tears streaming down my own face now. I needed her to understand, I needed them all to *run*.

I won't be the reason Arthur loses his family, I thought desperately. *Not after what happened, the things he said. I can't.*

And then…Ellie was there. Not just her physical presence, but her mana, pushing into me. She was reaching for my own, soothing it and calming the storm inside me. It snapped back at her, its agitation held in check but not quelled. Her spellform was a wonderful piece of magic, but this teenage girl couldn't match herself against the might of Agrona Vritra and expect to defeat him. I knew that all too well.

The spellform! My mind lurched, my thoughts only half connected to one another.

My Alacryan runes were swallowing up my mana, activating, and unleashing their pent-up spells back against my body. But the spellform I'd received in Dicathen was dormant, at ease…

As Ellie struggled to control the self-destructive mana, I opened my core and *pushed*. As much mana as I could control flooded the spellform, and Alice gasped. I opened my eyes to see ghostly flames dancing across my body. Alice had flinched back even as Boo's jaws reached for my throat.

"Boo, don't!" Ellie screamed, and the creature hesitated.

"Flames—won't hurt…" I gasped, but I couldn't voice more than that.

Although I'd practiced with the new spellform constantly for weeks, now the flames spilled out around me and across the floor without direction. The room vanished beneath them, so it was just me, Alice, Ellie, and Boo huddled amid a heatless conflagration. And…some of the tension eased with less mana being pulled to my other runes.

Wind yanked at my heel, and my leg bent unnaturally with a tearing and cracking sound that summoned bile up the back of my throat. The flames faltered, and the wind exploded, hurling Ellie back. The rest of my bones creaked as Boo pressed his weight down more fully, pinning me to the floor as the blustering winds sought to tear me apart.

I fought through the pain, kept channeling mana into the new spellform, then hot hands were pressing against my face and neck, a silver glow suffused me, and healing magic poured through me. The agony of my back and leg cooled. Ellie was there again, her will surging against the curse activating inside of me, the force of my own runes trying to tear me to shreds.

More mana flooded out as ghostly fire, burning it all away. Desperate and wild, I activated the silver cuff as well, sending the thin spikes of silver out to hover around us all, imbuing them with all the mana my unfocused consciousness could grasp.

And as my core emptied, I felt Ellie's probing fingers of pure mana strengthen and tighten. She was taking control, holding my mana down as I burned it away, emptying this assault of the fuel it needed.

My leg shifted and popped as it moved back into place. A bloody gash on my hip sealed over. My core ached as I crushed every last particle of my own native mana from it.

With the same suddenness with which the attack began, it ceased, my body purged of whatever sickness was causing it.

Ellie and Alice kept working, ensuring my body was healed and the little lingering mana in my veins remained under control, but Boo eased back, taking his paws off me. My collarbone fused back together and healed under Alice's touch.

Minutes passed as we all lay in a heap, breathless and sweat-soaked, before Alice broke the silence. "Caera, are you okay?"

I only hummed my affirmative response, not sure how "okay" I really could be.

She swallowed and glanced at Ellie before continuing. "You…well, you said…about Arthur."

I stiffened suddenly as Agrona's voice once again filled my mind. *"I gave you the power you wield, and it is mine. Work against me in action, word, or even in thought, and the magic that was my gift to you will become your bane. These first brave few, for acting as my example to you, have spared*

their bloods from the same fate, but any others who disobey condemn their mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters to share their painful and gruesome end."

"No, oh Vritra, no…" Corbett, Lenora, Lauden, and the others. They were all in danger. *Because of me.*

I struggled to sit up, but Alice pressed a hand against my shoulder. "Rest, Caera. You need to—"

"Vajrakor," I moaned, pushing aside her hand and continuing to struggle. "I have to warn the dragons. They *must* know."

Alice blinked in surprise, but Ellie stood and took my hand, pulling me to my feet. "I'll come with you."

"We'll all go," Alice said firmly, an expression of fierce and protective love hardening her features. Without waiting for permission or even understanding, she headed toward the door.

I stumbled after her, Ellie helping to support me.

My entire body protested the movement, but I broke into a run after Alice, through the labyrinthine halls of the Earthborn Institute, out into the city of Vildorial, and up the long highway to Lodenhold, the dwarven palace.

My heart sank when we found the outer halls full of nervously gossiping dwarves. No one stopped us even as we entered the throne room itself.

It was empty. The dragons were gone.

38

LIKE A SUMMER STORM

JASMINE FLAMESWORTH

As the mana surged violently off to the east, another dragon flew over the Wall, speeding away with frightening urgency. I glanced over at Helen but found no answers; she was just as uncertain as I was.

The Wall's defenders, adventurers from guild halls all over Sapin, lined the top of the colossal structure, staring nervously eastward over the Beast Glades. There was little we could do except watch and hope nothing approached, but it seemed like Arthur's caution was borderline prescient; it hadn't even been a full day since he went into his refuge beneath the Wall.

Lance Mica Earthborn came down from where she had been flying high above, hovering in the open air in front of us. Her stone eye, black as a cloudy night sky, gave her a fearsome look. "That was one of Vajrakor's guards, I'm certain of it. Unbelievable. If they've left the cities undefended, I'll…" She trailed off with a sigh and a shrug. "By rock and root, what exactly am I going to do about it? But they shouldn't be leaving their posts. The rift must be under attack, so they're going to defend it. The only thing that makes sense, really."

"If there is a force in this world that can defeat the dragons, then this is all for naught anyway," Helen said matter-of-factly. "As for us, all we can do is

the job that was entrusted to us. Arthur lies vulnerable beneath our feet. We need to keep him safe and whole long enough for him to accomplish his goal. That boy's been fighting for us since he was fourteen years old. Now it's our turn to fight for him."

Lance Mica nodded gravely. "He's our best hope, dragons or no dragons."

"I wish he was here now," Angela Rose said, leaning over a crenelation and looking down. "Whatever's happening out there, it'd be a lot less scary if I knew our resident Lance Godspell was protecting us, and not the other way around."

Lance Mica scoffed. "Well, you'll have to make do with just me, but I've been—"

"What's that?" Angela asked, leaning a little farther out and staring into the trees. "There's something moving in the shadows."

The Lance flew twenty or so feet away, then cursed and wheeled around. "Man your posts, the enemy is—"

Dozens, *hundreds*, of spells erupted from the shadows of the trees. It shouldn't have been possible; no sizable force could move so quietly and without a glimmer of mana signatures, and yet somehow the Alacryans were right on top of us.

Lance Mica batted away a handful of spells and dodged others while conjuring plates of stone to deflect as many more as possible. Bolts of fire and lightning, spears of ice and air, and bullets of every element collided with the front of the Wall or the gates far below, while more spells were aimed at the adventurers standing atop the structure.

Like ants, hundreds of Alacryans poured out of the trees that were cut back a few hundred feet from the base of the Wall to provide better line of sight to the ground—not that it'd helped.

Spells began to rain from the top of the Wall, but shields of a dozen different shapes and colors absorbed or deflected most of the damage. All around me, adventurers were shouting for orders or running to get to their positions, caught out of place by the suddenness of the assault. Helen was

directing traffic, but she had her bow in hand, and with every order shouted, she loosed an arrow down into the oncoming army.

“Angela, you’re supposed to be with Durden at the vault!” Helen ordered, letting off another shot.

Angela Rose hesitated before nodding and hurrying away, pushing past other adventurers who were rushing to the Wall’s edge to start casting their own spells. There was too much traffic to wait for the long elevators, so she leapt down a flight of stairs and vanished from sight.

A round blade of wind hissed through the air between Helen and me, forcing us both to dodge away. It clipped a conjurer across the side of his neck behind us, taking him to the ground with a surprised yell of pain, then curved around and came back. I caught it on a wind-imbued dagger and deflected it back in the direction it had come from, but it carved a wide arc through the air and returned once more, this time bearing down on Helen.

A shield of dark rock appeared in front of her, catching the disc but shattering under the force of its impact. A mana-infused arrow hissed through the remaining rubble, carving its long arc down into the army below. I didn’t see who the arrow struck, but the cutting disc of wind-attribute mana dissolved only a moment later.

Below, I saw a black blur speed away from the enemy forces, and then a cacophonous *crack* rent the air, followed by the trembling of solid stone beneath my feet.

A single towering, broad-shouldered, horned man had stepped forward from the enemy’s front line. The black streak had come from him. A sphere of gleaming darkness—solid, black metal—appeared in front of his outstretched hand before again flying at the reinforced gate at the Wall’s base.

Another crash, another tremble.

A surge of mana responded, buttressing the structure’s stone and metal with magic. “The reinforcement is holding!” someone shouted, their words heavy with relief.

“But for how long?” Helen asked under her breath.

A brightly burning comet appeared in the sky above the battlefield, hovering for only an instant before plummeting toward the man. I had to look away from the brightness, but the following flash and concussive blast nearly knocked me off my feet. I grabbed the soldier next to me, steadying myself and her at the same time, then returned my gaze to the battle.

The ground all around the horned man and the Alacryan frontline was scorched and blasted, but he didn't seem harmed at all. In fact—though it could have been the distance playing tricks on me—it looked like he was *grinning*. With a whip-crack flourish, he sent another projectile at the gates, and the Wall trembled.

"Not long enough," I told Helen, already moving.

Instead of wasting time with the elevator, or even the stairs, I bolted across the top of the Wall, planted one foot firmly on a merlon, and leapt out into open air. The buildings of the Wall's interior town were far, far below, but they rose toward me rapidly.

Concentrating air-attribute mana beneath one foot, I caught some of my own momentum, slowing me perceptibly before my weight broke through. I repeated this again with the alternating foot, and then yet again, like I was running down the air itself. Despite flying down the Wall's interior side at great speed, when I hit the ground a few seconds later, I didn't burst apart on the hard stone but instead pushed the collected momentum forward into a dead sprint toward the interior of the main eastern gates.

Dozens of adventurers were already gathered there, conjurers holding fireballs in their bare hands or swirling with freezing air next to augmenters imbued with mana, some wrapped in stone or with burning weapons. Stone pillars had been pulled up from the ground to support the gate, and the soil was grown over with venomously green, thorny vines.

The gates rang like an enormous gong as another projectile struck from outside. The mana pouring through the Wall's interior to reinforce it was like a physical charge in the air, but there was a whining, strained element to it that told me the defensive measure wouldn't hold out much longer. *Not nearly as long as we'd hoped.*

A scream punctuated through the resounding crash at the gates, and a man plunged down the inside of the Wall, only to be caught moments before striking the ground by a condensed cloud of wind and water. Outside the gate, I heard the earth shifting and stone grinding against stone.

The gates burst apart as an enormous black iron spike ripped through it, large enough and with so much force that it cracked the foundations of the Wall around it.

As one, the defenders flinched back. Many had already conjured shields or other protective barriers, which saved many lives as the giant spike shattered into hundreds of spear-sized slivers, spraying death in a wide arc behind the gate. Stone burst, mana cracked and collapsed, and ice shattered as the spears carved a bloody swath through our number.

Crawling to my feet—having thrown myself beneath a barrage of the black iron spears—I stared through the newly punched opening. Hundreds of Alacryans were charging toward us, weapons and spells raised. Outside the shattered gates, the battlefield was littered with gleaming shards of some black crystal. The Lance kneeled amidst the wreckage. She seemed stunned, as if she'd taken a mighty blow.

As I wavered on whether or not to rush to her side, the shattered remnants of crystal began to rise and fly to her, snapping into place all over her body like plates of armor. She stood, and a wall of gravity, visible as a distortion in the air that raced ahead of her, pulling the dust to the ground and crushing the soil down several inches, barreled toward the approaching soldiers.

The hard-packed ground moved beneath her feet, and five black fingers curled up from the soil, closing in around her like a fist. She raised one arm, suddenly holding a huge stone hammer. She swung it straight down into the metal palm with all her might.

Stone and metal screeched as both hammer and conjured appendage shattered, but the gravity wave had been interrupted, subsiding just before striking the charging army. Lance Mica cast a calculating look back through the tunnel mouth, and then she was flying through it at speed, back into our ring of defenders.

“For Dicathen!” she bellowed, hovering ten feet in the air above us, her hammer gripped in both hands.

“For Dicathen!” the adventurers shouted in response, their voices resounding through the fortification.

A gout of green flame spread out ahead of the charging Alacryans, burning away the thickly tangled vines, then an obscuring mist spilled out of the tunnel mouth, hiding the enemy from sight. An instant later, spells began firing out at us. As one, our cohort returned fire, dumping everything we had into the gap.

“Choke the breach with the bodies of their dead,” Lance Mica growled.

Suddenly the mist fell out of the air, revealing the progressing soldiers, hidden behind their conjured shields. They struggled to progress forward, their feet dragging across the ground as if they couldn’t lift them.

An answering bellow came from within the tunnel, and then the horned man burst out, flying over the Alacryan soldiers and colliding with the Lance. The two crashed through the wall of a nearby building and vanished from sight, and the Alacryans were once again speeding forward.

Ducking beneath a beam of orange fire-attribute mana, I darted forward and threw myself at the first enemy I reached. A panel of mana appeared just where I struck, catching the blow and turning it aside. He raised a spear in response, thrusting at my ribs. Whirling, I caught the spear on one dagger and moved it aside as I tossed the other dagger in the opposite direction. A panel of mana appeared to protect a different Alacryan soldier, but the dagger, held within a fist of air-attribute mana, curved around behind my target and drove in between his shoulder blades. The spear went limp in his grasp, then my first dagger sank into his chest. With a twist of mana, the dagger in his back leapt to my hand.

Recalling everything I had been taught about how the Alacryans fought and the way their battle groups were structured, I searched for their Shields, those mages who focused on protecting the others. All over the battlefield, swirling barriers of fire and wind appeared to deflect the spells and blows of my allies, and we were quickly losing the game of numbers as more and more of the Alacryans poured through.

As I ducked past a Caster slinging bolts of condensed lightning, a building behind us exploded outward, raining rubble down on the battlefield. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Lance Mica swinging her hammer with enough force to distort the air around her, and each blocked blow seemed to ripple outward from the impact and send tremors through my bones.

Her opponent—a Scythe, I was certain—deflected the blows with a towering shield of black iron that rang like a giant bell with each strike. He wore a look of ecstasy, reveling in the combat. Thankfully, he had eyes only for her. But I had no time to gawk at their fight.

A Striker closed in on me, orbs of white-blue lightning spinning around them. A gusting barrier of wind moved with them, and not far behind, a Caster channeling mana into fiery bolts fixed me with a dire stare. As the Striker swung with his bare fist, the lightning orbs moved in an echo of the blow. I leapt back, imbuing mana into both daggers as I looked past the Striker to the rest of his battle group.

The twin daggers flew, curving out around either side of the Striker, one arcing toward the Caster while the other flew farther, aimed at the Shield's core. The wind enveloping the Striker pulled away in a cyclone of dust, flying even faster than my weapons to intercept them. At the same time, I lunged forward, pushing a burst of air-attribute mana in front of me to knock the Striker off balance. His orbiting balls of lightning cast about in the wind like fireflies, and I flitted between them to drive a wind-wrapped fist into his solar plexus.

My daggers, which had been hurled off course by the Shield's wind-attribute spell, flew right back into my hands as I rolled past the gasping Striker. A single quick slash across his exposed back finished the man, and I bore down on the Caster, whose flaming bolts pelted toward me with dangerous speed.

Off to my right, two battle groups broke and fled into the town. There weren't enough defenders to stop them.

Cursing, I deflected one bolt, let a second glance off my shoulder, and then dove between three more, my blades leading the way. The barrier of wind caught my forward momentum, sending me into a full backflip. As I landed,

I flicked out with the right-hand dagger. The barrier jumped again, moving between me and the Shield, but the move had been a feint. Instead, the left dagger launched from my hand, propelled to lethal force by a gust of air-attribute mana.

The barrier lurched, trying to move back into place to protect the Caster, but too late, and the man choked in pain and surprise as the blade punctured his chest, shearing straight through him before spinning around to the right and embedding itself in the Shield's side. The cyclone of protective wind wavered, and I ran through it, jumping and planting my knees on the Shield's chest, driving him to the ground even as my second dagger opened his unprotected throat.

The Wall trembled above me as the Lance and Scythe slammed into it, bounced off its surface, and slammed into it again. The flow of mana into and through the Wall's physical structure pulsed rapidly, and hail-sized bits of stone rained down on the interior town, clacking off rooftops and bouncing across the street. A few bodies tumbled from the Wall's top with them, landing with a wet crunch.

As I searched for my next target, I could only hope that Helen was not among them.

More Alacryan battle groups had broken away, running into houses or along the base of the Wall instead of continuing forward into the line of defenders. Dozens of adventurers had advanced behind me, and the street was slick with the blood of both Alacryans and Dicathians, bodies strewn about like felled trees after a hurricane.

"Pen them in!" I shouted, projecting my voice with a burst of wind mana through my lungs. "We can't let them have the run of the Wall!" My mind turned to the mages whose efforts had been feeding mana into the Wall, the source of the reinforcing magic. "And send extra men to guard the support team." Most of those mages were no longer fit to fight, too wounded from previous battles but still able to channel mana.

More adventurers were finally arriving from down the long series of stairs that zigzagged through the Wall's interior. I pointed out the direction of

enemy troops and shouted orders where it seemed appropriate. Most knew me, and those that did were quick to comply.

This wasn't my first battle in the Wall, after all. I didn't like to think of my time here just after the first war, and I enjoyed my memories of the battle against the army of corrupted mana beasts even less—the battle where Reynolds had died—but I knew the fortifications, and I'd seen the Alacryans' strategy before.

This was different. They didn't have the manpower, and they were pinching their forces through the narrow gates and then scattering, a strategy that would get them into the fortification but never allow them to keep it. Their losses were too great, even with the Scythe present to punch a hole in the Wall for them.

"Hunt down and take care of the stragglers," I told several adventurers from Blackbend as they charged down the street toward us. "They're searching for where he's hidden. Don't let them find it. Root them out!"

Running back into the fray, I cut down a Striker standing over a fallen adventurer, a young man no older than sixteen. Helping the boy to stand, I indicated that he follow me. "Press forward to the gate! We have to close it off."

Men and women rallied behind me, shouting their war cries, and we surged into the press of Alacryans forcing their way through the rubble of the gate and the collapsing arch that had once held it. Behind us, a three-story inn collapsed as a wave of force radiated out from where Lance Mica and the Scythe fought back and forth through the air over the town.

I focused on headhunting their Shields, flowing past the fighters like wind over rocks to bring down the men and women that kept them safe. Without the practice or natural talent for cladding themselves in protective mana, my adventurers made short work of them without their Shields. As we made headway, their force began to clog up the tunnel, stuck there, unable to progress forward against the backs of the soldiers in front of them.

A few of the adventurers threw spells into the tunnel, trying to take advantage of having them so crammed together, but the density of Shields made any such attack nearly impossible.

All through town, I could hear the sounds of battle as our people hunted down those who had slipped past us. Their assault was flagging, the intensity of it diminishing each second that they struggled to force their way through the gates and with each body that piled up only adding to the barrier.

There was a lull, and I realized with some disorientation that I'd been tuning out the cacophony of crashes and explosions that were issuing from Lance Mica's battle with the Scythe. Looking up, I saw her wrapped in a mid-air wrestling match with the much, much larger man. His shield was gone, as was her hammer, and they grappled with each other bare-handed. She had one of his arms caught in the crook of her elbow, her fingers clamped tight around his wrist, while her legs wrapped around his other arm. Her right hand twisted one of his horns, yanking his neck around viciously.

For his part, the Scythe's body was trembling with barely constrained power. The pounding of his pulse could be felt with waves of mana hammering down on us, thudding in my chest with more force than my own heartbeat. His lips curled back in a sneer, and his arms closed inch by inch. I suddenly feared that he would tear the Lance in half.

Then, with a sound like thunder, his horn snapped. The burst of mana that raged out in a sphere threw me to the ground and struck the side of the Wall with such force that it collapsed in on itself, the reinforcing mana finally seizing and failing entirely.

I watched with horror as a crack ran from the gate tunnel all the way to the top of the Wall. Stone shifted with a noise like an earthquake, then collapsed downward, a fifteen-foot-wide section of the Wall falling into the void of the tunnel. Barely visible through the ensuing cloud of dust, bodies were tumbling down with the stone.

"Move, move!" I shouted, scrambling back to my feet and sprinting away as boulders bounced over the rubble and out into the street, demolishing houses and crushing entire battle groups of Alacryans.

Above it all, the Lance had released the Scythe. I could feel the wall of mana radiating out from her as she attempted to catch and stabilize the

rockfall, both preventing it from taking down the rest of the Wall with it and from swallowing half our forces.

The one-horned Scythe reeled back, nearly tumbling from the sky, his broad face a mask of disbelief and agony. His right arm hung limp, badly broken, and he wept dark blood from dozens of wounds.

Audible even over the collapsing Wall, a horn suddenly sounded. It was a deep reverberation that came up through the soles of my feet, vibrating my teeth and pummeling me behind my eyes.

The shocked Scythe searched the ground before spinning and shooting off into the air, flying up over the Wall and vanishing from sight.

I couldn't see any surviving Alacryans on this side of the Wall, and there would be little left of those who'd been inside the tunnel when it collapsed. Although I couldn't see them, I could sense enough of their mana signatures to know that those outside the fortifications were turning and fleeing back to the Beast Glades.

My mind reeled. The attack had come on like a summer storm and ended just as quickly, but why? My gaze drifted to the bullish horn still clutched in the struggling Lance's hand, but it hadn't been the Scythe who had signaled the retreat.

Cheers went up around me as people started to realize that we'd won, and they'd survived. I could hear them all the way from the top of the Wall. Closest to me, the cheers became shouts for the Lance, her name repeated over and over.

I could tell with a simple look that no answers to my questions would come from her, however. The armor she had conjured around herself, made up of interlocking plates of the black crystal spell that had been shattered earlier, was in ruins, blood covering as much of her body as the remnants of her armor. Her mana signature was fading and spiking dangerously, and her one eye stared around as if she were in a daze, only half hearing the cheers.

My feet began carrying me away from collapsed gates toward a nondescript door in the base of the Wall, one of many that allowed access to the forges and other essential operations housed within the broad Wall itself. As the

cheers faded behind me, I had the unshakeable thought that they were somehow *unearned.*

The door was open, and several soldiers—Alacryan and Dicathian both—lay dead in the plain stone room beyond. Following a tunnel into a series of identical labyrinthine passageways, I made my way down into the bowels, picking up speed as I went until I was practically jumping down each flight of stairs.

Reaching a lower landing, I found what should have been a secret door hanging off its hinges, smashed inward, the stone face shattered. Beyond the door, a narrow, hidden stairs went down in a different direction.

Conjuring a gusting barrier of wind that ran just over my skin, I gripped my daggers tightly and proceeded down the hidden stairway, circling around and around as it took me into the bedrock on which the Wall had been built. Below, I could only sense one mana signature alongside…something *other*.

Taking a deep breath, I jumped down the final stairs, preparing to face whoever was waiting below, but was brought up short with a gasp.

The guard chamber outside the vault, itself locked and barred, both physically and magically, lay open. The room beyond was slick with blood and littered with the corpses of those who had been set here as a last line of defense.

“Durden?” I asked, my voice high and tight. My knuckles went white around the hilts of my daggers.

Durden looked up at me from where he sat in the blood. His face was smeared with scarlet, as was his arm and the prone form pulled roughly into his lap. It took a moment to see the features beneath all the blood, and I felt myself harden against the reality.

Wrenching my gaze up and away from the sight, I looked past the outer chamber to the vault door Senyir had crafted. It hung slightly ajar, and a silvery pink light was spilling out to reflect off the crimson pools. Stepping past Durden, whom I could feel watching me—his heartbroken gaze attempted to find solace in my empathy, but I couldn’t afford to give it, not

in that moment—I approached the vault door carefully, my blades ready, already imbued with cutting wind that spiraled around the blades.

“Arthur?” I asked, feeling foolish. I knew better than to hope. Still, I nudged open the vault door, which protested, its hinges twisted.

Inside was the same plain room I had watched Arthur step into a day earlier. Some kind of mana construct now glowed from atop the metal pedestal that Senyir had placed at the center of the room. The elongated orb filled the bowl that capped the pedestal, and itself seemed to be filled with a rich, purple energy that glowed out through the pure mana, giving the room its pink tinge.

Arthur wasn’t there. A cold realization spread from my guts outward, numbing me from the inside.

Turning my back on the beacon, I returned to the guard room, my boots splashing in the lifeblood of those who’d watched over this empty chamber.

Light, rushed steps on the stairs drew my attention past Durden, who was no longer looking to me for support. Helen practically jumped down the last flight, just as I had, and she too gasped at what she saw, though the noise she made was choked with an emotion I had been suppressing.

Now, though, I kneeled beside Durden and carefully wiped away the blood that shrouded Angela Rose’s features. Her eyes stared lifelessly, and it was that more than anything that broke through the hard shell I was trying to maintain. Those eyes, in life so bright and full of teasing amusement, now empty of their spark. With a shaking hand, I pulled down the lids, telling myself it would look like she was just sleeping, even though I knew it wasn’t true.

Durden opened his mouth to speak, but only a raw moan of pure, condensed lamentation bled from his lips.

“Arthur?” Helen asked, her voice strained as she took a faltering step forward.

I swallowed heavily, standing suddenly and striding away from the rest of the Twin Horns…both of them that remained. “Hopefully fine, wherever he is. Because he’s not here, and he never was.”

39

WORDS ALMOST SAID

SETH MILVIEW

The couple of hours after the Wraith's arrival and Agrona's message seemed like a fever dream. Lauden Denoir, Sulla Drusus, Baldur Vassere, and the others weren't the last to succumb to our cursed runes, and there was just no way to come to terms with the person next to you spontaneously combusting in a cloud of their own destructive magic.

Just as there was no way to come to terms with the fact that I was being asked to pick up a weapon and take lives to save my own—the lives of people Professor Grey had convinced to give us a chance.

We didn't spring into action immediately. Our people had to be collected from across the borderland, the farthest of which was a journey of a few hours. Lady Seris was receiving our strategy and instruction from Perhata, and we were waiting for additional mages from Alacrya.

Lyra had handed me over to the quartermaster to help distribute equipment, and I was almost glad to be shuffled off to the large meeting hall, out of sight and out of mind, where I stood behind a crate of spears and handed them out one by one to all who approached. In the absence of a need for logical thought, my mind wandered desperately, almost vindictively.

When Circe went to war in Dicathen, she had little choice, but at least she had been a soldier going to war. She'd thought that she was fighting for her home and blood, and that by doing it well she could provide me a better life when our parents couldn't. But this was different. I'd made friends with Dicathians and had seen the rot at the heart of Alacrya. It would be wrong to take the lives of others just to extend my own. Just because the High Sovereign held a guillotine over my neck…

I glanced at Lyra Dreide, who was overseeing things, encouraging those who hesitated, and pushing all to action. Lady Seris and Lyra had seen so much more of the High Sovereign's cruelty than I ever would, and yet they both chose life. What did that say about them?

What does it say about me? I wondered, handing a spear to a young woman I recognized from Central Academy but whom I didn't know personally. She nodded firmly and moved on to collect a shield from Enola of Highblood Frost, who was standing grim-faced nearby.

Maybe…maybe it would be better to refuse, like the others. Go up quick, burn out like a candle flame. I felt my throat constrict as I considered it. Not so long ago, I might have welcomed death as an end to my sickness and suffering. Then Circe had succeeded where all other Sentries had failed in charting the elves' magical forest, and we'd been elevated, and Mother and Father had gone away to establish themselves in Elenoir, and I'd been cured…and had met Professor Grey and Mayla and the rest of the students at the academy.

For the first time in my life, I felt like I truly had something to live for, and yet the cost was too high. How many lives would I have to trade for my own? I bit back a sudden dark, humorless chuckle. None, probably. I wasn't a soldier. It was more than likely that I'd be cut down in the first minute of the fighting, and I'd die anyway.

That thought brought a sort of peaceful calm with it, easing the tortured ache behind my eyes. *I shouldn't die on his terms. If I have to end, shouldn't I do so the right way?*

I closed my eyes, unresponsive to the line of men and women still waiting for their weapons, and took a deep breath. *High Sovereign. I hope you can*

hear me. If you can, listen very carefully. My name is Seth Milview. My sister was Circe. Silas was my father and Cerise my mother. They have all died for this war, for you, but I will not. I ref—

A commotion from outside interrupted my thoughts. The lines for weapons and armor were breaking apart as people tentatively made their way out into the sunlight, looking around. Enola cast me a dark look and left her posting.

Curiosity waging a war against the unthought words still burning in the back of my mind, I followed more slowly, almost clinging to the walls, nervous to leave the shelter they provided from the chaotic swell of activity throughout the encampment.

Outside, in an open space near one of the raised fields, several Instillers had set up a large rectangular frame out of some dark material. It was powered by metallic blue wiring connected to large mana crystals. A portal already shined within the frame, and people were beginning to step out.

My heart sank.

I recognized some of them as members of the bloods that had accepted the High Sovereign’s invitation to abandon the rebellion and return to their normal lives.

Those who arrived looked afraid and confused. They were armed much more effectively than our ragtag collection of weapons and armor, but they utterly failed to maintain any semblance of order. Seris, shadowed by the Wraith, Perhata, attempted to maintain at least a bit of organization, offering the force’s leaders quick instructions about where to go and how long it would be.

But I didn’t take in any of her words. My focus—my entire consciousness—homed in on a single point.

Even with her long brown hair hidden beneath a leather helm, Mayla was unmistakable. Her bright eyes, wet with tears and crinkled in worry, shone like beacons through the press of bodies that surrounded her. She clutched an oversized pike close against her chest, the sharp tip pointing straight up into the air, and she looked around her with obvious terror.

Breaking into a run, I pushed my way past other people, barely registering that they were just as out of place and uncomfortable as Mayla, trying to reach her. She was being pushed along with her battle group within a larger patrol of mostly young Alacryans, none of whom I recognized aside from her. I searched their faces for an older girl who looked like Mayla, but no one matched that description. Although it wasn't much to be relieved about, at least it seemed as though her sister hadn't been sent as well. As an unadorned, it was unlikely that Loreni would have survived even moments in battle with Dicathian mages.

"Mayla!" I shouted, waving one hand over my head. "Mayla, over here!"

She frowned, her neck twisting this way and that as she searched the milling soldiers for who was shouting. Through a gap between two huddled battle groups, her eyes met mine, and she broke down into sobs.

I burst through the others and had to rein myself in so I didn't knock her down when I ran into her. Still, we came together like storm-tossed waves against seashore cliffs, knocking a struggling breath from both of us. A breathless laugh wheezed through Mayla's crying, and I choked on the many competing emotions tumbling through my own chest.

A heavily armored young man who was a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than me grabbed Mayla's shoulder. "Back in line, Fairweather, we need—"

Despite his obvious physical advantage, I pierced him with a white-hot glare, and he jerked his hand away as if he'd been burned, regarded me uncertainly for a couple of seconds, then shrugged and rejoined the rest of the battle group.

"Vritra, Seth, what's going on?" Mayla asked after a few more long moments, her voice strained. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't they tell you where you were going?" I asked.

She shook her head weakly. "We're in Dicathen, right? We…we were all rounded up and brought to Taegrin Caelum. I thought they were going to kill us! And they did…a few, anyway. When they said they wouldn't fight.

Because that's why we'd been gathered together—to be armed and sent to fight in Dicathen."

I was shaking my head in disbelief. "It's worse than that, Mayla. The High Sovereign, he's searching for Professor Grey. That's what we're doing: fighting our way across Dicathen to search for him. And if we refuse…" My eyes narrowed, a hot blade of anger cutting through the confusion of all those other emotions. "He's turning the runes against us, Mayla. Burning us up with our own magic."

She somehow paled even further, her eyes flaring. "That's not…"

"It is," I assured her desperately. "He can sense it in us, that hesitation and refusal. If you even *think* you aren't going to follow him, he'll scorch you from the inside out."

I quickly explained everything that had happened, my will to refuse service waning. Mayla grew more shocked with every word and was left empty and drained by the time I'd finished. Unexpectedly, she suddenly brightened as some thought struck her. "But Professor Grey…Arthur Leywin. He can fight back against Agrona. If we *do* find him, we can—"

I shook my head frantically and squeezed her hand tight. "Don't. Don't even think about it. Whatever happens or doesn't, just focus on fighting our way through to the professor. That's it."

She seemed hesitant. "But what if…" She swallowed, clearly not wanting to finish the sentence.

"We'll take care of each other," I said firmly, trying to believe it. Even if I had been ready to make *that* decision for myself, I couldn't ask Mayla to do it too. Neither could I take the easy way out and leave her to fight and maybe die in this battle, alone. "We'll form our own battle group and do what we've been told in our own way." I was scrambling, searching for any path through this, but I was careful to control my thoughts. I wasn't refusing service, and neither was Mayla. *We are complying*, I thought forcefully.

Holding her hand, I began pulling her away from the lines of Alacryans still filing through the portal, and I had another revelation. *Seris and Lyra…they*

aren't fighting back against these orders because…they can't ask us all to sacrifice ourselves. That was it, *that* was the trap. Even those of us who wouldn't fight to save our own lives would for our bloods…our families… the people we—my eyes jumped to Mayla and away again even more quickly—loved.

"Where are we going?" Mayla asked, stumbling along beside me.

"To find the rest of our battle group," I explained firmly, searching the crowd for familiar faces. When I caught sight of who I'd most hoped to see, I waved. "Enola!"

Enola of Highblood Frost was easy to spot; her golden hair practically glowed in the sun. She was standing with some members of her blood, but thankfully her intimidating grandfather wasn't present. They all turned to look at me when I shouted her name, and I felt myself shrinking as my steps faltered.

Enola said something to the others, then broke away and marched swiftly toward us. I stopped, glad to be able to speak out of earshot of her blood.

"What is it, Seth? Shouldn't you—Mayla!" Enola regarded the other girl skeptically. "Is it true, then? They're forcing everyone associated with Lady Seris to fight?"

Mayla filled Enola in on what she'd experienced, adding a few details that she'd omitted previously—like the pile of bodies that retainer Mawar used to make an example of anyone too frightened to comply with orders, or the fact that she was basically kidnapped from her own home by a couple of goons, leaving her mother and sister screaming after her. It wasn't just those who had walked away from Seris's rebellion in the Relictombs that came through the portal, however; their entire extended bloods—at least, those who were mages—were forced to fight as well, and many residents of Sehz-Clar who were only tangentially connected to the rebel forces had been caught up in this too.

"Vritra's horns," Enola cursed, her nostrils flaring. "All this for what? A wild wogart-chase through Dicathen for the professor? I can't believe that after everything, I still ended up fighting in the High Sovereign's armies.

Professor Grey, he said…" She trailed off and shook her head slightly. "Never mind. So what is it you want from me?"

I cleared my throat and shuffled uncomfortably. "I…well, Mayla and I have no blood here. I haven't received a battle group posting, and she is placed with strangers who don't know her and whom she can't trust with her life. We've trained together, and we all know what's happening. If we stick together…"

Enola stare was intense and even a bit intimidating, but when I trailed off, she didn't hesitate to answer. "My blood has formed battle groups of their own, but I wouldn't see the two of you cast off. I'll join you. Together, we can keep each other alive and proceed with this 'mission' in a way that will not stain our honor."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank you."

Mayla practically fell forward and wrapped her arms around Enola, making the other girl look extremely uncomfortable. "Thanks," she let out through a choked sob, then pulled away and cleared her throat, standing a little taller. "Thank you," she said again more firmly.

"I'm a Striker, obviously, and Mayla, you're a Sentry?" Enola asked. When Mayla answered affirmatively, Enola inspected me closely. "I can't seem to recall talking to you about your runes or training, Seth. What role do you fill?"

I rubbed the back of my neck nervously. "I'm…flexible. It seems like we need a Shield most, but I can work as a Caster as well."

Enola blinked. "What do you mean?"

Someone began shouting behind me, and I flinched instinctively. Irritated with myself for my skittishness, I forced myself to straighten. "My emblem is a bit more flexible than most, I guess."

Enola's light brows rose, but her eyes flicked past me, prompting me to turn and look.

"—simply unfair! A rotting branch is reason to prune it, not to rip up the entire tree by the root and cast it into the fire." A young woman with brown

skin and dark eyes was making a scene. Lyra was cutting through the crowd toward her.

I didn't recognize the woman, but I did know two of the people who surrounded her, clearly her blood. Director Ramseyer attempted to speak to her, trying to assure her of something, but she was refusing to look at him. As startling as it was to see the director here of all places, though, seeing Valen standing several feet away, his arms crossed and back to his blood, a horrible scowl on his face, was even more so. But his eyes were red, and his dark skin wan and almost sickly looking, and I immediately felt a pang of worry for him.

Lyra raised her voice as well, pointing at the Ramseyer blood accusingly, when Valen noticed me watching him. He cast a disparaging glance over his shoulder and marched quickly away from the commotion, which had gathered quite a bit of attention.

"*You* were aligned with Lady Seris?" Enola said in disbelief bordering on disgust.

"Of course not!" Valen snapped with his usual superior air. "But my cousin, Augustine, failed to hold some city against *Arthur Leywin*, and my grandfather hired him and gave him significant support before his identity was revealed, and that is apparently all it takes to damn our entire blood. Sending a hundred-year-old man into war on a moment's notice, can you imagine? The High Sovereign has lost his Vritra mind."

"Well, you're with us now," Mayla said with a weak smile.

She reached out her hand to Valen, and the simple gesture was enough to crack his stone-carved exterior. He took her hand, outwardly relieved.

We filled Valen in on what we knew and had planned, and his face grew stony and distant again. "That makes sense. Looking at how disordered this rabble is, no one will think to counter us. Not the most battle-tested of groups, but if we stay close to the Ramseyer and Frost bloods, we'll be well protected."

"*While* ensuring we adhere to the letter of the High Sovereign's commands!" Enola said quickly, her voice growing momentarily thin with

nerves as her eyes cast about like she expected to find the High Sovereign hiding in the shadows watching us.

“Then we have our battle group,” I said with a firm nod.

Enola and Valen left to inform their bloods of their intentions while Mayla and I shuffled out of the bustle. An awkward silence fell between us, swallowed by the greater noise of the preparations. Mages continued to file through the portal for a few more minutes with varying degrees of disorientation and resistance.

My thoughts were a complicated muddle, and I could feel the same from Mayla. We held hands, but I found it difficult to look at her, dressed in her leather and chain armor, the runes on her back proudly displayed. Her jaw was rigid with tension, her eyes downcast.

We’d been so close to a different life, but I felt like I’d woken up from a dream all of a sudden, and the worst thing was that I couldn’t even trust my own mind not to betray me. I had to keep my thoughts ordered and marching in neat little rows, carefully skirting around any rebellious intentions.

I squeezed her hand. “We’re going to get through this.”

She tried to smile, but the expression didn’t reach her eyes. All she managed for a response was a weak nod.

Enola returned first, grim-faced but set on her path. Valen was there a minute later, his gaze distant and haunted. We didn’t speak, only watched as people much older and more frightened than us struggled to follow orders and organize into battle groups. At length, the Instillers deactivated the portal, appeared to work on changing the settings, and then reactivated it.

“How do they know where to send us?” Mayla asked.

I thought perhaps it was a rhetorical question, but I’d overheard the Wraith explaining to Seris earlier, and so I answered. “The dragons have apparently all been drawn to the place where our world connects to theirs. We’re being sent into a city called Vildorial. They’ve deactivated their long-range teleportation gates and even most of their local gates, but apparently this new technology can search out and link to any active portal. All we need is

for them to miss even one of the portals, and we can connect and infiltrate the city that way."

"And have they?" Mayla said. "Missed one, I mean?"

Valen gestured to the freshly activated portal and the Instillers gathered around it with Seris, Lyra, Highlord Frost, Highlord Denoir, and a number of other ranking Alacryans, all under the watchful eye of Perhata. "Seems they must have. I doubt there was any question. I don't know anything about this city, but it seems unlikely the High Sovereign would have left such a thing to chance. Not for an operation of this scale."

Suddenly Lyra's group was breaking up, and someone sounded a signal. Group leaders were shouting orders, battle groups fell into line, and my heart began to beat rapidly.

Enola, I noticed, was looking away from the portal. I followed the line of her gaze to a large group of children being monitored by a handful of unadorned—who couldn't, lucky for them, be forced into this war by the threat of their runes, since they had none.

When I looked back, Lyra was marching straight toward us. I straightened nervously.

"You've found some people you can trust to have your back, that's good," she began without preamble. "Place yourselves near the middle of the line if you can. Avoid being on the front line, but being too near the rear could result in you meeting an already-engaged Vildorian defensive effort. Don't be heroes, but…" She paused, rolling her words around in her mouth. "This thing we must do…there is no reason to make yourselves villains, either. Trust that there is more to all this than what you can see, and protect yourselves while being true to what you believe. The world has changed a lot in the last two years, for all of us. Don't despair that this change will result in nothing but a reversion to the worst of us. Understand?"

A chill ran up my back. Although Lyra's words were directed at all four of us, her eyes stayed on mine the entire time. I nodded weakly. "Of course, Lady Lyra. And…thank you, for everything."

She smiled very slightly. “I’ll see you on the other side, Seth Milview. You and your friends.”

We found ourselves being herded toward a growing line of battle groups queued up to march through the portal. Although the gate on this end was wide enough for several people to walk through abreast, word went down the line that the receiving gate could only receive four at once, and so each battle group would step through together, one after another.

It seemed, somehow, to take both a very long time and feel like time was moving very quickly, like it was fading in and out around me as the first battle groups—those brought by some of the highbloods from Alacrya, actual organized mages with proper equipment and training—marched into the bright, opaque rectangle of the portal behind Lady Seris, her retainer Cylrit, and Lyra, who took the lead. Like a puncture through a dam, we began flowing into the little gap, disappearing four by four.

My imagination surged and stumbled, conjuring all kinds of scenarios about what was happening on the other side, and then suddenly we were standing directly in front of the portal. Djimon Gwede, a bare-chested warrior with skin the color of bronze, who’d once been a high mage of the Ascenders Association, was waving us through the portal. The Wraith, Perhata, was glowering at us with unconcealed derision from Djimon’s side.

I glanced to my left, but Enola was staring straight ahead into the portal. To my right, Mayla was clutching her weapon so tightly that her knuckles had gone bone white. On her other side, Valen sucked his teeth and gave me a sharp nod.

As one, we marched into the opaque surface of the portal.

The ground was ripped away beneath my feet, and I felt myself hurtling across the continent. The sensation lasted only a second or two, then I stumbled out into a dark, dusty, and cramped space beyond, nearly running into the back of a middle-aged Caster who had been in line ahead of me.

The chamber containing the receiving portal had partially collapsed in some kind of magical explosion, and the mages ahead of us were forced to crawl over the rubble. Enola wasted no time in following them, forcing the rest of

us to hurry after her as she pushed the mage ahead of us with a hand on his back.

Spellfire crackled and boomed from beyond the collapsed hallway. It wasn't a long tunnel, but the difficulty in navigating it had caused our forces to become congested there, slowing our progress to a crawl. Through the rubble and the occasional space between bodies, I could see other Alacryans fighting beyond the opening, and beyond them a massive underground cavern the likes of which I'd never even imagined.

"Seth, be ready with a shield," Enola ordered with a quick look over her shoulder. "Mayla, you stay back with Seth. Use your abilities as a Sentry to read the cavern. Search for the professor, you remember what his presence feels like. Valen—"

"I've been through all the same battle group formation training you have, Enola," Valen snapped. He had sweat on his brows, and there was a tremor in his voice. "I know how to handle my own magic, thank you very much."

I swallowed, thinking about the runes marking each of our lower backs. "Be careful with your thoughts, everyone."

The tension, already thick enough to carve with a battle axe, increased more still.

As the mages ahead of us breached the tunnel's mouth, they immediately joined in the fighting, flinging spells, conjuring weapons, and ducking behind shields as they attempted to make room for those of us coming behind them. If the tunnel became blocked, our forces would be divided and quickly rendered powerless, waiting to perish one by one as we broke loose. And I had no idea what would happen to the portal if it had no place to put new arrivals…

The gruesome thought spurred me forward, and I channeled mana into my emblem. The magic activated easily, swelling outward through my channels and veins to wrap me in a comforting sheath of magic that emitted a faint blue light.

It had taken a long time and a lot of practice to get to this point, and even longer to realize the emblem offered more. I had only reached the first

couple of stages of its activation, but that was enough to understand that it was unusual. The officiant of the bestowment ceremony hadn't acted as if anything was strange, but I had never felt like the emblem fit into the strict categories usually given to bestowals.

Once the mana was clinging to my skin, I pushed it out, and it flowed forward to cocoon Enola. An instant later, she broke free of the rubble, and a stone bullet struck her in the side, shattering and sending a forceful ripple through the conjured shield—and an ache like a punch into my core as the spell pulled at my mana stores to support itself.

Still, it was better, having something to focus on. I buried everything else, all the fear and horror of battle and layers of conflicting emotions, beneath the focus required to hold the spell.

"Move, move, move!" a wiry mage was shouting, waving us forward. "Break through the defenses and make your way into the city! Finding their Lance is your only priority, so go!"

We had come out onto a kind of highway that corkscrewed around the outer walls of the huge cavern. Dicathian forces, made up mostly of dwarves but peppered with humans and elves as well, were penning us in from the left and right, giving our newly arriving troops little room to maneuver and almost nowhere to go. The defenders were still struggling to get into position, though, and had obviously been caught wrongfooted by our sudden appearance.

Spells rained all around us, and I expanded the shield out from Enola so that it wrapped around all four of us as we crossed the highway to stare out into the dwarven city.

It was amazing. I wished there had been a chance to come here before all this happened. The architecture was like nothing I'd ever seen before, sturdy and purposeful and yet still quite beautiful. I should have been studying these people, not trying to kill them.

A stray bolt of blue fire impacted the shield, which was both weaker and harder to manage at this size, and it wavered dangerously.

“Seth, pay attention!” Enola snapped. She pointed down the bend of the highway. “There, that side street. If we can get past those groups of Dicathians, we could lose ourselves in the cover of the buildings clinging to the cavern’s edge.”

“And how exactly do you propose we do that?” Valen asked scathingly, looking pointedly up and down the road. “Our forces are stuck. This portal has brought us in far too high.”

As if in answer, someone on our side conjured an enormous boulder of deep blue ice, which began rolling down the curved highway, glancing off the cavern wall and crushing the front porch of a home carved into the side as it built up speed, quickly approaching the line of defenders. Several spells broke or melted pockmarks into the ice, but many of the Dicathians, I realized as I watched, weren’t mages.

They arranged their shields in such a way as to catch and corner the boulder. It slammed into them hard enough to send several sprawling, and at least one looked unlikely to rise again. Those behind shifted positions to drive the boulder into the wall, using friction to counter gravity’s effects on it. They were trying, I realized, to prevent it from continuing to roll or to go off the steep cliff-like edge of the road, which would have seen it plummet down onto the structures below.

Several battle groups were following in the boulder’s wake, however, giving the dwarves little time to wrangle the wayward projectile. “There, with them!” Enola shouted, sprinting forward. I had little choice but to follow, and Mayla and Valen were right there with us.

Our side plunged into their scattered line with spells and blades, widening the gap and forcing the defenders back. My stomach jumped up into my throat as I watched a dwarf driven over the edge by a plate armor-clad behemoth who appeared to have no compunction against killing.

I had to pull the shield in closer to us, forcing our battle group to run in a tight knot. Red-hot metal bolts pinged against the shield’s surface, and Enola was forced to deflect the blow of an axe that managed to sink through the protective barrier before I stabilized it. Her counter strike sent a dwarf

reeling, and I looked away before she could deliver a killing blow, but she didn’t go in to finish the dwarf off, instead leading us deeper into their lines.

A thunderclap from my left, out in the open air above most of the city, sent a jolt of shock through my chest and limbs, making my heart thump painfully and my feet stumble. I nearly tripped and fell, which likely would have been the end of our push forward, but Valen grabbed me by the arm and kept me upright.

I just barely caught sight of Lady Seris and Cylrit flying in circles around a man in thick metal armor holding a long red spear. His blond hair was flying wildly about him, and his eyes glowed the blue-white of a lightning strike. Electricity raced over his armor and flashed toward the highway behind us, directly at the knot of Alacryans holding the tunnel entrance.

Black mist boiled out of thin air and swallowed the lightning, unmaking the spell.

With little attention to spare, I still felt a primal shock deep in my core as I watched the three exchange spells and blows, unable to believe that this single knight was holding his own against a Scythe and retainer.

A punishing vibration, visible in the air as jagged black lines, rolled like a tidal wave across the Dicathian forces. Protective shields of stone and metal were conjured in an attempt to disrupt the effect, but they all shattered. The dwarves around us clapped their hands to their ears and fell to their knees, making way for us to sprint past unharried.

Enola continued to lead the way, pounding down the paving stones of the curving highway in search for cover. More Dicathians were still pouring in from all over the city, and if we didn’t find a way clear of the battle zone, we would be isolated and…

I tried not to think about that part of it. I’d been so busy worrying about having to kill anyone, I’d almost forgotten that there was a very real possibility I would die in this battle. The knowledge settled over me with the weight of my own funeral shroud, and I angrily wiped away scared tears.

“There!” Enola didn’t wait for us but jumped off the edge of the highway, fell several feet, and landed on the sloped, tiled roof of a dwarven house that was formed directly to the cavern wall beneath us.

Valen followed her without fear, tossing a bolt of crackling dark mana at a squad of approaching Dicathian soldiers as he flew through the air. I hesitated long enough to take Mayla’s hand, and we jumped together, obsidian bullets colliding with my shield in the moments before we slipped beneath the road’s rim.

I landed awkwardly, and my feet went out from under me so that I was plunging down the sloped roof like a child on a snow sled. Mayla’s hand slipped free of mine as she caught herself, but all I could see was the looming end to the roof before it plunged down three stories into a garden of jagged rocks.

My fingers scrambled to find purchase in the grooves of the tiles, but they only fumbled numbly. I felt my heart stop as open air yawned beneath me, the sharp rocks gleaming below.

I lurched to a stop, my plain brown leather armor choking me as someone grabbed it by the back of the neck. Slowly, I was reeled back onto the roof’s edge. Looking around, I met Enola’s eyes. They were wide and red from the sweat pouring into them. “Thanks,” I wheezed.

“We won’t get far without our Shield,” she answered gruffly. But she didn’t let me go until she was confident I had my feet under me.

Above us, Valen and Mayla were carefully making their way down the slope. Above *them*, a dwarf peered down from the highway. His hands were swirling around in front of him, his lips moving swiftly beneath his beard in some kind of chant as orange light was condensed into liquid magma in front of him.

“Go, go!” I shouted desperately, conjuring the shield again—having let the spell fall while I did the same—and layering it over our heads.

Enola didn’t bother to verify what I was seeing before she jumped from the roof to a balcony several feet below. Valen was right behind her, Mayla a few steps after.

Blobs of bright orange lava splashed like thick rain on the shield, my mana popping and hissing against the dwarf's attack. Going down on one knee, I drew the shield in tighter, thickening the barrier, then, hoping that I didn't kill the man, I thrust upward. The shield flung the lava away, spraying it against the cavern wall and up over the edge of the road.

The dwarf yelped and dove out of sight, and I turned and jumped down to the balcony with the others. Enola was already climbing down a pillar, with Valen waiting just behind, a jagged fistful of dark mana ready for anyone who attacked in the meantime. I sent my mana to Enola, protecting her while she scanned the vicinity for enemies.

Through the glass-fronted balcony door of the home, I met the eyes of several dwarves all hunkered together on the floor near the far wall of a dwarven bedroom. My chest ached as I considered my orders: was attacking innocent civilians a part of my mandate?

I looked away, knowing deep down that I couldn't do that, no matter the cost.

The ache in my chest moved along my spine and into my runes, the magic seething, just barely within my control as the barrier rippled and came undone around Enola. Thankfully, she reached the ground without incident, but I was left gasping and shaking. Mayla was our Sentry—she could find Professor Grey, she could, I knew it, and I had to protect her—I was doing my duty, following orders—and the tension eased, the mana crackling under my skin soothing and returning to my control.

I conjured the barrier again, wrapping it around Mayla as she descended. Trembling, I followed, doing my best to keep the shielding mana in a place even as my mind went numb with the fear. Again, I leaned into the sensation of conjuring the spell, using it to force everything else beneath the surface.

"You all right?" Valen asked as he shimmied down after me.

Unable to speak, I only nodded before turning away and hiding my face.

Enola was scanning the narrow street. It was carved into the wall with surprisingly large houses lining either side. Yet more houses clung to the

cavern wall below us.

“There!” a gruff voice said. Two Dicathians had rounded the edge of the neighboring house, catching us standing open in the street.

Valen threw a spell as Enola put herself between us and them, urging Mayla to run in the other direction.

One of the Dicathians—an elf, by the look of her—was holding an unusual two-handed blade. The metal was blackened and gleamed with dim orange veins, and there was a strange bulkiness to the guard and handle, which fit awkwardly in her hands. Even as I noticed it, it flared orange with a blistering heat I could feel from twenty feet away.

Elves can’t use fire-attribute mana.

The thought came up from nowhere, some factoid sealed away for later use during my study of Dicathen.

I was still wondering about it as the two Dicathian soldiers charged.

I stumbled back farther, keeping Mayla behind me and my focus on Enola in order to shield her. Valen hurled his spells, but the elf moved with stunning quickness for someone without a mana signature, flowing like wind around the black bolts of mana. When the orange blade carved toward her hip, Enola dodged instinctively but didn’t bring her own blade to counter, instead aiming a quick counter blow at the elf’s arm.

A gasp burst from my lips as the sword carved through the mana I was conjuring, just barely missing Enola. Her own surprise sapped the strength from her swing, and her mana-imbued blade slid harmlessly over the elf’s armor.

But the sword was so hot it left Enola’s hip scorched black, and she immediately stumbled back, a hand pressed against the spot in dawning horror.

The human man drove shield-first against my mana the same instant that I forced it back together, sealing the wound left by the strange weapon. He spun, crashing a hammer into it, aimed at Enola’s head, but the attack was

deflected. A bolt of dark mana hit him in the chest an instant later, throwing him to the ground, the heavy metal armor over his torso blackened and torn.

It might have been a fatal strike if not for Dicathian mages' inherent ability to protect themselves with mana at all times.

The elf carved into my shield again, this time attacking the spell directly and cleaving it open wide enough for her to leap through. She slashed at Enola, forcing her to stumble back, still wrong-footed, then thrust forward toward Valen. Instead of trying to shield him, I wrapped my mana around him and pulled him away from the blow, interrupting the casting of his next spell but getting him well out of reach of the fatal cut.

But the elf didn't stop moving, lunging off her back foot and taking aim at my neck. My mana condensed around her arm, which stopped moving suddenly and with enough force to wrench her shoulder out of the socket.

I grew nauseous as she screamed in pain, the sword falling from her limp grip.

Enola's blade sprouted from the elf's chest. My mana slipped out of my control, releasing the woman's arm, and she slumped to the ground, blood gurgling up from her mouth. I was frozen, unable to see anything except the woman I'd just helped kill.

How much of her family died in Elenoir with mine? I wondered, forgetting everything else.

A roar of battle fury ripped the curtain from my eyes just in time for me to watch the man's hammer collide with the side of Enola's helmet, snapping her head sideways and dropping her as if she was full of grain instead of muscle and bones.

Valen threw another spell, but it rebounded off the man's rune-etched shield, which hummed as it pulled mana from its wielder to support the enchantment. The man's hammer flew through the air toward Valen just as I was conjuring my shield again; I only barely deflected it away from him, but that forced it to strike Mayla in the shin, and she collapsed to one knee with an agonized moan.

I took a half-step toward her, distracted, and only saw from the corner of my eyes as the man dove for the dead elf's burning weapon. Valen was falling back, hurling spells, but the Dicathian deflected one after another.

When he reached the blade, instead of continuing on, he fumbled with the hilt, and I felt a surge of magical energy from within it.

Acting on pure instinct, I wrapped him in a cocoon of mana, but he drove the blade through it, cutting his way free and issuing a wave of blistering heat that knocked me down and reddened my skin even through an additional layer of mana. He raised the blade with a trembling arm while fending off Valen's spells with his large metal shield, and I felt the power condensing inside of it like a building explosion.

A streak of silver arced through the air from our left and struck the sword, knocking it from the man's grip and sending it flying. It stuck into the side of the house. There was a flash of heat and light, and I was suddenly lying face down on the ground ten feet from where I'd started. The Dicathian, Valen, and Mayla were similarly prone.

Soft-soled boots hit the ground with a patter only barely audible over the ringing of my ears, and then a pair of legs appeared in my vision. I looked up into the gleaming point of a bright white mana arrow. Following the arm that drew the bow's string, I found myself gazing in shock into a familiar face.

"Eleanor?"

She scowled, her eyes red within a face both fierce and full of rage. My only thought, empty of any real sense, was that the expression seemed so unlike the girl I'd met in the Relictombs.

"Don't move, Seth. Don't make me kill you."

40

DIVERGENCE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

…*Wait.*

I struggled to open my eyes, but even when I accomplished the task, I could barely see. Only one thing was clear. *Mom.* She was younger, much younger, the stress of hard years lived not yet showing on her face. Her auburn hair was thicker and richer in color, her skin smoother, her eyes brighter.

I felt myself fill with warmth as I stared up at her.

“Hi, little Art, I’m your daddy. Can you say *dada*?”

“Honey, he was just born.”

My tiny, strained eyes widened as I looked at my father. I’d almost forgotten how charismatic he’d been, especially back then. His square jaw was still cleanly shaven, highlighting his youthful features, and his hair, ashy brown in color, was kept trim. A shadow of a memory, like another layer of my mind working separately beneath my consciousness, referred to his eyebrows as extending sharply like two swords, strong and fierce, but simultaneously drooping and gentle.

As I gazed up into his deep blue, almost sapphire, irises, wet with tears, I felt my own eyes begin to water. Waves of complex and competing emotions rolled through me, and I broke down. A wild, infantile keening issued from my tiny mouth and lungs.

“Doctor, is something wrong?” my father asked. “Why is he crying?”

The doctor dismissed my father’s worry, saying, “Newborns are supposed to cry, Mr. Leywin. Please continue resting for a couple of days. I’ll be available in case you need me for anything.”

I don’t understand. This moment marked—marks?—the first day of my new life…doesn’t it? But surely I haven’t been reborn…again? I felt myself growing hungry and tired. It was difficult to keep my thoughts straight. *I just…need to rest…to eat…then I’ll think more clearly.*

Somewhere deep in the back of my head, I felt a pressure that was both cool and dark and comforting, yet intense and vibrant and on guard, but I couldn’t bring anything more to the forefront of my conscious mind than just that as I drifted into a cloud woven of fatigue, uncertainty, and the yearnings of an infant’s body.

I squealed with a baby’s delight as my father swung me around his simple bedroom. Everything he did, I adored, rewarding him with wild giggles and starry-eyed stares. It seemed nearly impossible to maintain the dissonance and rational logic of an adult who had lived half a century across two different lives already, even before being reborn again into my own infant body.

The memories of my previous time as a baby rested half-formed on top of my conscious mind, like oil on water. But my life was different this time. *I* was different. I couldn’t be certain why, but the pull of being a newborn was much stronger, like yet a third layer over my personality.

In fact, whenever I stopped focusing on who I was—the Arthur Leywin who had already lived twenty years of life, who had fought Scythes and asura, who had mastered all four elements only to lose them before finding

aether instead—I seemed to sink beneath the surface, living my life exactly as before without conscious thought or effort. Much the same way one might walk commonly tread paths to arrive at their destination only to find that they have no recollection of the journey.

There was a knocking sound and unexpected pain in my leg. An infant's instincts overrode my logical senses, and I began to cry, loud and desperate.

Father looked around in a panic, pulling me tight against his chest and patting me on the back roughly. "Hush, Art, hush. It's just a scratch, you don't need to—"

"Reynolds, what did you do?" Mother's voice entered the room just ahead of the woman herself. She swept me out of my father's arms, glowering at him, then began to fuss over my scratch. "Oh, my baby! Your father has mutilated you. It's okay, little Art, it's okay. Your mummy is a healer, didn't you know?"

Still crying, I was set down on their bed. Then, with a hiccup that shook my tiny, soft body, I stopped as light began to issue from Mother's hands. The light bathed my wound, and the scratch began to fade away as if it hadn't ever been.

This moment was my first realization of how different magic was in Dicathen than ki on Earth. Watching Mother heal my wound had been a springboard into my interest in mana. Only, now…

Purple motes drifted through the air, almost as if coming to investigate the light. They danced within it, swirling around my mother's hands and rolling along my skin.

"Aether," I said, realizing several things at once but forgetting to maintain my posture as an infant.

"Excuse you," Mother said with a silly smile, pinching my nose very lightly. "See, all better." She rubbed at the patch of skin that no longer bore a scratch, but I wasn't fully paying attention.

I can see the aetheric particles.…but I couldn't have seen or sensed aether at this point in my life. I was only a few months old, and I didn't even have a

mana core. It would be many months before I would even start the process of gathering all the mana in my body into a core…unless—

Little things, moments, had been different, changed by my actions, but for the most part I walked through this chance at my life in the exact steps as before.

I felt a strange and discomforting déjà vu as I remembered that I had activated the fourth keystone. *Fate,* I thought, scrunching up my face in concentration. *I am searching for insight into Fate*.

This sudden revelation of aether drew my focus inward, to the yin and yang of darkness and light that pressed against the inner layer of my subconscious like a sound not quite heard.

Sylvie! Regis! I felt my soft baby limbs squirm as anxiety flooded through the tiny frame. How had I forgotten them? They should be with me, they—

'They are,' a slightly distorted, feminine voice said. I turned my head clumsily, trying to look around the room. Mother was frowning down at me, asking a question, but I couldn't absorb her words.

Instead, I met the golden eyes of my bond, Sylvie, except they weren't quite gold but see-through like the rest of her. She looked the way she had before, young and new, only barely having acquired her human form. Except she was also gaunt and…haunted. Even discounting her incorporeal nature, she seemed weak, like she was fading.

Oh, Sylvie, you are *here. Have you been the entire time? I'm sorry, it's much more difficult to maintain a sense of myself in this form—*

'No, Arthur. I'm not the Sylvie who entered the keystone with you.'

I hesitated to respond, deeply confused. I was growing tired again, and my eyes were drifting closed as Mother rocked me in her arms and cooed me to sleep.

'I'm the Sylvie who brought you to the Leywins, who watched over you on Earth, who has yet to be reconnected with the piece of me now held in stasis within my egg,' Sylvie thought, her words forming not in the air but directly in my head. She gave me an understanding smile. *'It's confusing, I know.*

Because, really, I'm not that *Sylvie either. I'm your* projection *of that Sylvie. Because that's all this is, all any of it is. You're projecting your life into the keystone realm, and the magic contained here is allowing it to play out again while you sleep—dream.'*

My eyelids fluttered, and I felt my infant body relax. *'But…it feels so real. And if it's true'*—I yawned and stretched my chubby arms—*'how would you know? You can't…know anything I don't…'*

And then, although I tried to prevent it, I drifted to sleep again.

With a rush of mana, the core formed in my sternum. It felt great, beyond words even. I simultaneously felt the rush of success at having formed the core for the first time as well as the sentimental joy of a mana core drawing in mana within my sternum once again, something I never thought would happen.

I started to close my eyes to sense my newly formed mana core, but the memory of what happened next slipped through the time-fog that had been constantly swallowing me, and I instead stared around at the half-demolished home, the rubble of which was still raining down from the sky.

Distantly, I heard my mother shout, "Art! Oh, my baby! Are you okay?"

But my focus was on something else. Not the newly available sense of mana that tingled at the edge of my consciousness, but the amethyst motes of aether that had been displaced by the outward pushing force of my awakening. Not only had those closest been displaced, but aether beyond the sphere of wreckage seemed to be drifting closer, almost as if curious, like the aether itself was coming to investigate.

But why would aether act like that? I had forgotten to consider how I could even sense it, much less what its presence and actions suggested, my last couple of years swallowed up within the rhythm of reliving my life as a toddler.

In the background, Mother, who had taken me in her arms, weakly said, “Congratulations, Art, honey,” while my father exclaimed, “You awakened, Champ.”

Struck by a sudden consideration, I tried to activate God Step. There was no glow of a burning godrune, no sense of aether flooding through my nearly three-year-old body, which made sense: I had no aether core and no godrunes. And yet, the aetheric pathways lit up dimly before my eyes, flickering and fading rapidly in and out, as if I were seeing two competing images of the world set one atop the other.

I immediately stopped attempting to channel aether as my sternum clenched painfully.

“Art, honey, are you sure you’re all right?” Mother asked, tears in her eyes and lines of concern wrinkling her smooth skin.

Beside her, completely oblivious, Father was practically jumping up and down within the wreckage. “My boy is a genius! Awakened before the age of three! This is unprecedented. I thought I was fast, but this is on another level!”

“I’m sorry, Mom, I’m okay,” I said, resisting the urge to dig my fingers into my aching sternum.

As a neighbor ran up to see what had happened, I reached for Father, who picked me up proudly and let me rest in his arms. Within the comfort of his protective shell, I stared at the atmosphere around the house, watching as more and more aether seemed to gather, like so many violet fireflies.

“Stop,” I said, a rush of previous-life memory suddenly bringing my whole mind into the present. I looked around, truly realizing where I was.

Perhaps it was something in my voice, but the caravan came to a halt as Durden pulled the skitters to a stop.

“What’s the matter, Art?” Father asked, looking puzzled.

I swallowed heavily, growing frustrated with all of this for the first time. It was maddening to realize I had slipped away in the fugue of simply reliving my past life.

A chill wind was blowing through the Grand Mountains as our skitter-pulled cart wound its way toward the gate that would take us to Xyrus. I was almost four, I'd already been introduced to the Twin Horns, and we were approaching the most fateful moment of my life.

Fateful…

The word buzzed inside my head like a trapped bumble bee. *Why am I only remembering this now?*

We were nearly upon the bandit ambush, the moment that would take me away from my mother and father for years, that would make me miss the birth of my sister.

I looked hard at my father and felt a knot growing in my throat. I wasn't ready to leave him again, to lose him. Not when I could stop it.

"Art, honey?" Mother said, putting her hand against my cheek and then the side of my neck. Looking at my father, she said, "Reynolds, he's warm."

"Are you coming down with something?" Father asked, hopping over the row of seats to get closer. "Can you heal him, Alice?"

"I'm not sick," I said finally, though there was certainly a sick twist in my guts.

I genuinely didn't know what my life might look like if I didn't fall off that cliff defending my mother. But I couldn't just let us stumble into an ambush that might have gotten any one of us killed. It didn't, of course—except for me, in a way—but how much had I already changed as I'd lived through this life? Events had unfolded almost exactly the same, but what if it was just enough to cause some subtle change?

What if, this time, the wounds that Helen and Father take turn out to be fatal? I asked myself.

“There is an ambush up ahead,” I explained in my small voice. “We need to be careful.”

“What?” Father asked, caught off guard.

Durden and Adam exchanged a look, while Angela Rose peered around us as if she might catch some sight of this hidden ambush. Jasmine rested one hand on my shoulder protectively.

Helen’s eyes burrowed into my own, searching for truth, before she said, “Safeguard formation. We proceed slowly, spells at the ready.”

Instead of relaxing, my heart only beat faster as I immediately began to wonder if I’d done the right thing. I pressed into the light-and-dark spot behind my eyes, but felt only a dim, amorphous stirring. Overcome by the emotions of a not-yet four-year-old’s physical form, I wanted nothing more than the comfort of someone to assure me that I was making the correct decision.

‘You won’t find that here.’

My head whipped around, and I found myself looking up at the young, ghostly image of Sylvie, who was drifting a few dozen feet up in the air, watching everything happen with a melancholy expression. *What do you mean?*

She gave a small shake of her head, sending a wave through her transparent wheat-blond hair. *‘You’re alone, Arthur. Maybe more so than you’ve ever been before. And that’s going to be the hardest part. Because no one else can understand, no one can guide you. You’ll have to bear the weight of the consequences alone, too.’*

I waited, expecting something…more. An affirmation or expression of positivity, or the assertion that, actually, I wouldn’t be completely alone, because she was with me, but no such kindness offset her harsh message.

You don’t sound like yourself.

‘Of course not,’ she said, the pitch of her voice rising. *‘I’m me, but as you interpret the “me” that was left behind after I gave up* being *me so* you *could continue to be you. I’ve told you what happened to me. Maybe…’* She

paused, considering. *‘Maybe I’m a little more me than that, since a part of the real me is here with you.’*

But you said I was all alone.

‘And you are. But maybe not forever. Remember that. It doesn’t have to be forever.’

My face scrunched up in uncertainty. I was struggling to make sense of her words, and my gaze kept jumping away from her to search for the impending ambush by bandits. One of these times, when I looked back, she was gone.

The fighting broke out suddenly. I was quick to point out the four conjurers and the leader: the Twin Horns took them down with expert precision, a much cleaner fight than had happened the first time. No one was even injured.

After the battle, I slipped away from Mother and walked to the edge of the road. Sylvia was out there, watching, or so I thought. In truth, I had no way to know. Would she still save me if I simply slipped and fell, or even jumped off the ledge myself? I inched closer, breathing shallowly. Closing my eyes, I leaned forward, and—

A strong hand grabbed my arm, and I snapped back to reality. Turning, I found myself face to face with my father, who scooped me up and set me on his shoulder. “Whoa, careful there, Art. That’s a long old fall,” he said with a laugh. “Hey, how’d you know those guys were there, anyway?”

I swallowed, looking back out over the forest far below. “I don’t know. Just felt them, I guess.”

He laughed again. “Just felt them, he says! If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, my boy’s—”

“A genius,” Adam and Angela Rose said at the same time, their tones lightly teasing.

We all got back in the wagon, and Durden made the skitters go with a gentle wave of the reins. My mother pulled me close, and I rested my head on her shoulder. *She’s pregnant right now*, I realized, the knowledge fuzzy, like a

fact only half-remembered. *Dad never got injured, so he didn't tell me to run with her or that she is carrying another baby. My sister, though they don't know that yet. Ellie.*

I frowned. It was hard to keep these facts in order. But maybe it was just because I was so *tired*. *One of the problems of having a three-year-old's body*, I mused, letting my eyes shut. *For such a small body, it requires so much…rest.*

The last thing I felt was Mother's fingers feathering through my auburn hair.

Days flowed together into weeks, to months, to years.

Xyrus was amazing. I had the best tutors, and they thoroughly prepared me to join Xyrus Academy, which I did at the age of twelve—my core was already light red! My memories of my past life as King Grey had continued to fade, but that was okay. It became easier and easier to just be Arthur Leywin, bi-elemental augmenter and a lightning deviant, too!

Sometimes I regretted not becoming a tri-elemental or even quadra-elemental mage, but I knew that was silly. No one could become adept at utilizing all four elements. Still, there were times when flashes of my life on Earth would leak through, and I remembered ki, and I felt like there was more I could have done.

I even helped my little sister, Ellie, awaken early. Not as early as me, but Dad said not everyone could be a "once-in-a-generation prodigy." Mom had smacked him, and Ellie had pouted for days. I tried to help the girl we lived with, too, but Lilia couldn't quite get a grip on the mana. It wasn't surprising, I guess, since her mom and dad weren't mages either, but it did remind me that there were just some things I couldn't do.

A good lesson for a twelve-year-old, I thought.

"You seem nervous," Dad pointed out as we sparred in the days leading up to the start of my first term at the academy. We were out behind the

Helstea's residence, which they had been kind enough to invite us into. "It's only natural, Art. But even though these other kids might be older, not many of them will be more talented."

"I'm not nervous!" I insisted, lunging forward and sweeping my wooden practice sword at his shin. When he sidestepped, I brought it around and across my body, aiming at his ribs on the opposite side. He just barely got his own weapon into place. "I've still been a mage as long as they have. Maybe even longer!"

He parried a thrust, and I overextended, moving forward too far and exposing my flank. With a chuckle, he attacked my open position.

I jumped into a forward roll to avoid his strike and came back to my feet facing him. "I *did* awaken younger than anyone else has, ever."

"Don't get cocky," he admonished, although he couldn't hide the obvious pride in his twitching lips, flexed jaw, and gleaming eyes. "Just remember, don't let those nobles and royals push you around, but don't go starting fights either."

Taking my weapon in both hands, I thrust forward and released a geyser of steam, catching Dad off guard. He stumbled back, coughing and hacking, the skin of his face slightly red from the heat.

"But make sure and finish them if someone else is stupid enough to fight me!" I added, repeating advice he had given me many times before.

He waved me off, trying to catch his breath. "That's…right…" he coughed out eventually. "Okay, okay, that's enough for the day. Your tutor should be here soon."

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. "Come on, today? I'm *ready*." I brightened. "Let me come with you to the auction house instead! I won't be home as often once term starts, and I want to spend my time with you, not listening to another lecture about mana manipulation theory…" I trailed off as my father's slightly damp brows rose in his red face.

"Okay, okay," I said, giving up my half-hearted effort to escape lessons, my head hanging.

A calloused hand roughed up my hair. “Maybe your mother can bring you down *after* lessons. And dinner.” I looked up gratefully. Dad’s nose wrinkled. “And a bath.”

I thought of that moment a lot as the term started and I was pulled into academy life. It was difficult there. I was a good fighter and strong for my age, but the prodigy-like talent I had displayed as an infant faded with the memories of my last life. Still, that wasn’t so bad. It was a lot easier to just be a kid and not have all this stuff about Earth and being a king stuck in my head.

But yeah, Xyrus Academy was still difficult. I thought about the lessons Dad taught me whenever people tried to pick on me because I was so young. This happened a lot, especially from the noble kids, who all sucked pretty bad. The princes and princesses of Sapin and Elenoir even went there, although I stayed well out of their way. Still, barely any of them could manipulate two different elements, much less a deviant, and the director was really nice, although kind of intimidating.

It was almost too bad that I was stuck with so many of them for my very first field trip when my Team Fighting Mechanics I class was taken to a real dungeon in the Beast Glades, Widow’s Crypt.

“All right, is everyone ready?” our professor, an intense woman named Vanesy Glory, asked. “Then let’s head in. Brace yourselves—once we get inside, it’s going to be chilly.” She stepped through the entrance, which appeared to be a narrow stairway leading into darkness.

In a single-file line, we all began making our way down the stairs. The temperature dropped noticeably with every step we took.

“W-w-what the hell? I d-d-didn’t think it-it’d be this c-c-cold!” a boy named Roland said through chattering teeth.

“Augment yourself, you dolt,” I heard Clive, the student council vice president, say from behind. It was too dark to see anything more than the vague outline of each person.

I glanced at Clive, and my gaze shifted automatically to the elven girl beside him: the student council president, Tessia Eralith. She didn’t see me

looking, but Clive did. He sneered, and I looked away, feeling my neck grow warm.

As if I'd ever be interested in a posh elven princess, anyway, I thought angrily.

We made our way down into an enormous, moss-lined cavern.

"That's odd. Usually we'd see a fair amount of snarlers already. Why don't I—"

All of a sudden, hideous noises began echoing all around us. Peeking out from behind the numerous boulders and from small caverns dotting the walls of the cave were innumerable beady red eyes.

I clenched my fist around the hilt of the plain but serviceable blade the school had provided for this expedition. All around me, students were casting wary looks at Professor Glory, but I forgot about everything else as I felt the thrill of really getting to *test* myself for the first time.

"This is so odd. Even on the lower floors, there are never this many snarlers bunched together," Professor Glory said, bracing herself. "There are a lot of them, but they aren't impossible to handle. However, since this is just a class excursion, I think it's best to go back up, just in case. Safety is our priority." But as Professor Glory started slowly ushering everyone back toward the stairs, a fireball flew past her.

The fireball exploded and six of the snarlers were flung in different directions. Their smoking bodies, each about four feet tall with thickly muscled chests and arms and short bowed legs, lay motionless.

"See?" A snide noble named Lucas Wykes scoffed, brandishing his staff. "These nasty little beasts are weak. Professor, don't tell me you brought us all here just to go back. Even a small fire spell was enough to kill six of them."

Not to be outdone by the less talented mage, I burst forward and imbued fire-attribute mana into my blade, making it dance with bright flames. The burning sword carved a bright arc through the dimly lit cavern, striking through one of the ugly creatures' thick gray coat of fur, which smoldered

and gave off a horrid stench. Its beady red eyes stared up at me from a boarish, snouted face.

“Arthur!” the professor shouted, not able to hide her frustration and worry given the context. “Damn it, you two. Everyone, split into your teams and take different parts of the floor! We don’t want any friendly fire happening in here. And Lucas, Arthur, if either of you do something like that again, there will be consequences.” Professor Glory swept a menacing look across the two of us.

I nodded, feeling my cheeks burning.

“Prince Curtis, take your team and make your way toward the left side of the cave. Princess Tessia, take your team to the right of the cave and hold your ground. The last team, with me. I’ll be keeping an eye on you at all times, but stay vigilant and don’t underestimate the snarlers, especially in these numbers.” With that, Professor Glory motioned for the teams to move forward.

“Roland, I want you to be the vanguard, since you’re the best at close range,” Princess Eralith ordered, her voice carrying throughout the cavern. “Clive and Owen, you guys take positions behind him to his left and right and make sure he’s covered. Lucas, stay in the center, behind Roland and between Clive and Owen; I’ll cover your back. We’re going in the diamond position we learned in class.”

But I was with the professor, of course, since neither of the royalty had use for someone not from a noble household, even a bi-elemental mage. The battle was intense, and Professor Glory kept us on a shorter leash than the other teams had to deal with, but as I spun and ducked, my blade flashing, lightning imbuing my muscles to swing it even faster, I fell into a rhythm of dealing death.

And the thing was, I was *good* at it. And that *felt* good. I wanted more of it, that thrill of power. I’d wanted to become an adventurer ever since I was a little boy, but I really knew at that moment that I would follow in my father’s footsteps.

This is great!

Just then, there was a crack from above, and a huge spike of ice slammed into the ground just next to me. I was thrown off my feet and had to wrap myself in a shield of water-attribute mana to keep off the swarm of snarlers that leapt at the chance to take me down.

Professor Glory waded in with her two giant swords, one held in each hand, carving through multiple mana beasts with each swing. She didn't see the two winged monstrosities drift down from the ceiling until one had her by the shoulder. It lifted her up and tossed her away like a ragdoll.

I could do nothing as the second creature—something like the snarlers, but twice as large and with broad wings—leaned down toward me. Each of its front limbs had four long, sharp claws that glistened menacing as they approached.

My barrier came apart like tissue paper, and the claws plunged into me.

I closed my eyes, unable to understand what was happening. It *couldn't* end like this, it just *couldn't*. I was special, *unique* even. As the pain gave way to numbness, all I could think was, *What a waste…*

Everything faded to black. And then, within the black, a faint bit of distant light.

The light at the end of the tunnel, I thought, not yet cognizant of the fact that I should no longer be thinking at all.

The light grew closer, brighter, and then, as if I were looking through a foggy window, everything around me turned into a bright blur, forcing me to shut my eyes—despite being sure they were already shut. Indiscernible sounds assaulted my ears, making me dizzy. When I tried to speak, the words came out as a cry. The cacophony of indistinguishable sounds slowly mellowed, and I heard a muffled voice.

"Congratulations, sir and madam, he's a healthy boy."

41

MANALESS

CAERA DENOIR

The palace was abuzz with activity, which was no surprise. Slightly more surprising was the fact that no one had told me to get out or tried to clap me in irons yet, but I was thankful they hadn't. They needed the information I could provide because I knew what was coming.

In the unplanned-for absence of Guardian Vajrakor and his cohort of dragons, I had turned to Virion Eralith, de facto leader of the elves, to deliver the news of Agrona's attack. Arthur had left him as military commander of Vildorial, much to the dwarven lords' collective chagrin. Within the hour, he had assembled his war council and began preparing for a potential assault on the city.

Durgar Silvershale, son of Daglun, lord of their clan, presented himself before Bairon and Virion as his father looked on proudly. "The city is sealed up tight," he said as Virion acknowledged him. "Every entrance grown over with several feet of solid stone, like you said."

"With the new bunkers in place and any assault funneled through so few possible points of attack, the people will be safe," Hornfels Earthborn added, smiling as if this was the greatest possible news.

“Yes, well, you Earthborns have had two whole weeks to make that happen, haven’t you?” Daglun Silvershale grumbled.

Lance Bairon stepped into the middle of the conversation, silencing a potential argument before it could fester. “We’re still waiting for confirmation that all of the teleportation gates in Vildorial are deactivated,” he said, making no effort to disguise his frustration as he looked from the Silvershales to the Earthborns. “It should have been completed hours ago.”

Daglun cleared his throat. “We have disabled the new long-range teleportation gate brought in from western Darv, as well as all the short-range portals in the lower levels and the outskirts. The, ah, *lords* believe that keeping the gate here in the palace active is essential, and a few of us have private artifacts in our own estates, some of which should be kept in working order so that the nobility will be able to escape if necessary. Disabling *all* gates, along with sealing the great cavern, would trap us within the city, would it not? If what the Alacryan girl has said is true, and we are without both the dragons and Arthur Leywin, then I wouldn’t see our beloved home become an abattoir, not when we can save some, rather than none.”

I bit my lower lip as the dwarf brought me into it.

Hornfels looked sheepish. “In this, Lord Earthborn shares the Silvershale clan’s opinion. After all, Commander Virion, you yourself have sent your people out of the city for their safety. It would only be proper to leave us a potential escape route should such a thing become necessary.”

Lance Bairon rubbed the bridge of his nose, his mana seething around us. He spared a quick glance at Virion and then said, “No portals are to remain accessible for any reason, Lord Silvershale. Deactivate them immediately.”

The dwarven lord crossed his arms and glowered right back. “This should be decided by committee, *General*. May I remind you that Commander Eralith and yourself have no *official* capacity to give orders in Vildorial. Arthur Leywin, while a great hero, is not king of all Dicathen.”

Virion gave Silvershale a friendly smile, and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. “You are right, of course. I can’t make you do anything.

But if you do not deactivate them, Bairon here will smash them to rubble. Bairon.”

The serious-looking Lance nodded, and his feet lifted off the ground as he flew toward the doors of the war room. Daglun paled and sputtered incoherently as he chased after Bairon. “Wait now, see here, one of those gates is in *my* estate. Don’t you—” His words were lost to the general noise as he raced down the hall after the Lance, followed by Durgar, several attendants and members of his clan, and even Hornfels Earthborn.

Virion turned to the next person waiting for his attention, a kind-looking elven woman whose auburn hair was just starting to gray. “What news from our people, Saria?”

The woman gave Virion a soft, melancholy smile. “They have set up a temporary camp in the forested lands west of Mirror Lake. Aside from some tension with a few farmers, the journey appears to have been blessedly anticlimactic.”

“Good,” Virion said, his voice a growl. “Then I would like you to join them. Bairon will be taking you and a few other members of the small council, then he will stay to watch over the people there.”

Saria’s brows shot up and she took half a step back. Others within the war room were pretending not to watch the exchange carefully. “Forgive me, Virion. You have always been kind to my family. In many ways, the Triscans and Eraliths have been like kin. But I would not have you treat me as a child. I may not be my cousin, but neither am I helpless. Please, I would stay.”

Virion sighed and turned to a stack of scrolls, unrolling one and beginning to peruse it. “You’re worse than Bairon. No, Saria. Our people need leadership as well, and protection. Would that I could be in two places at once, but I trust you and Bairon to serve well in my stead.”

The woman bit back her response, gave Virion a shallow bow, and then turned and strode quickly away.

Virion looked up from his scroll, his gaze tracking across the room. No one else was waiting for him, and so he turned his attention to me. “And what of

you, Caera? Are you certain you want to risk the long journey to the Beast Glades after what has happened?"

"I have to," I said earnestly, thinking about what must be going on in the Alacryan encampments.

What would be worse? If Corbett, Lenora, Lauden, or the others had hesitated to fall in line…or if they were readying their weapons to go to war in search of Arthur…

"Lady Seris needs to know what I discovered. If I can help the others…"

"One last thing I should ask, I suppose, and I hope you'll forgive me, but… you're certain whatever happened—this combustion of your mana—will not continue to be a threat? I can't put others in danger if Agrona can use you as a weapon."

I bit my lip, considering my words carefully. "I can't be certain, Commander Virion. I didn't even know this trap had been set in my very flesh until today. No one did, I'm certain of that. But I can feel how it affected me…like it hollowed me out somehow. My own runes—my *magic*—feel distant, less mine. So no, I can't be certain, but I feel that the thing inside of me has gone… burned up. I should have burned along with it, so perhaps they did not anticipate needing to set it off more than once."

Virion extended his hand, and I took it firmly. "Arthur trusted you, so I will too. I may not know you well, but I can see you've got a good heart," he said, surprising me. "That as much as anything gives me some small inkling of hope for the future of our two peoples. I'll send word that the long-range teleportation gate can be active briefly, just to let you through. We can get you as close as Xyrus City, although it's still a journey to the Wall from there. If you don't mind accepting a suggestion, see if you can link up with a group of adventurers from the guild, since they're—"

The harsh rumble of an explosion shook the palace and brought dust cascading down from the ceiling. A wave of tension washed over the faces of all present as they turned to Virion.

He closed his eyes and seemed to be searching with his mana for the source. "It's only Bairon," he confirmed a moment later. "It seems as though

Silvershale and the other dwarven lords proved less than accommodating about the portals," he added somewhat harshly.

There was some grumbling from the dwarves in the room, conjuring a palpable tension, and Virion softened. "Forgive me, friends. Your people deserve better leadership than they've gotten since the Greysunders, but you all have performed admirably."

This simple comment seemed to diffuse the tension, and finally, Virion returned his attention to me. "Anyway, I've rambled enough. Good luck, Lady Denoir."

"You too, Commander Virion," I said, feeling slightly awkward as I turned and marched quickly toward the door.

Behind me, I heard one of the dwarves say, "Commander, a message from Etistin. They…they've spotted Alacryan forces near the city."

I slowed, turning back slightly to hear more.

"Damn it. Get word down to Gideon and that asura. No more time to wait. If they've got some weapon cooked up, they need to mobilize it now."

Just then, a powerful mana signature appeared as if from nowhere, cast across the city like a giant shadow.

I gasped, spinning on my heel to meet Virion's wide eyes. "Seris!"

The sounds of battle followed almost immediately.

I didn't wait for the Dicathians, instead springing away as fast as I could. My body ached and my core was depleted, but I cast the pain aside. If Seris was here herself—with Cylrit *and* Lyra of Highblood Dreide, so far as I could sense—then they hadn't known how else to prevent the Alacryan refugees from becoming walking bombs.

But Arthur wasn't *in* Vildorial. *He* was the objective. *Perhaps if I am able to convince them of that fact, they can leave without retribution from Agrona,* I thought hopefully.

By the time I had exited the palace, Alacryan soldiers were already streaming from a partially collapsed tunnel into one of the dwarven clan's

personal residences. Dicathian soldiers were hurrying out of the palace ahead of me and forming up across the road above the breach, preventing the Alacryans from coming this way.

The response from below was slower. Most of Vildorial's soldiers had been arranged in support of the sealed-off gateways into and out of the city, as well as at strategic defensive positions to protect infrastructure and the civilians.

The flow of Alacryans wasn't exactly rapid, with the tunnel they were exiting from half-collapsed, but Seris and the two retainers must have arrived first, paving the way for the others.

Now, Seris and Cylrit were engaged with Bairon over the city. Even as I watched, Bairon unleashed attacks at the cavern wall, attempting to close off the tunnel from which Alacryan soldiers were issuing, but clouds of dark mist—Seris's void technique—absorbed every one of his lightning blasts before they could land.

I stood frozen, unsure what to do next.

Was my blood down there, fighting for Agrona? Or had they resisted and met the fate that would have taken me if not for my new spellform and Ellie?

I couldn't reach Seris while she was fighting the Lance. Even if I'd had the energy to fight, I couldn't turn against either the Alacryans under Seris—most of whom I had served with throughout the short-lived rebellion—or the Dicathians that had allowed me to live among them.

Waves of magic, drawn in the air like lines of black noise, spilled across the battlefield below. *Retainer Lyra.* As the foundations of an idea churned sluggishly to life in my head, I began sprinting down the highway with the forces still trickling out of the dwarven palace.

I hadn't gone five steps before another problem presented itself.

I slowed well before the fighting, not wanting to get caught up in it. Lyra's flame-red hair was visible like a battle flag near the center of the Alacryan forces. The Vildorian soldiers were launching spells and mundane attacks

from both sides, but Lyra countered many of them all by herself. Alacryan Strikers were driving into the Dicathians, trying to burst through the lines.

“Lyra!” I shouted, but she gave no indication of hearing me. The sounds of battle—spellfire, shouted orders, and the screams of the wounded—swallowed my voice before it could reach her.

And yet it was far too great a risk to try and press through the front lines, where I could be mistaken as an enemy combatant by soldiers on either side.

With the little mana I had drawn in and purified since the detonation of my runes, I reached for the emblem that empowered my wind-attribute spells. Fatigue burned behind my temples in response, but the magic only flickered.

A stream of boiling water arced over the front line of Dicathians and fell among the mages, sizzling against the stonework only a few feet from me. At the same time, the highway trembled beneath my feet as, below, a huge boulder of ice crashed down into the forces attempting to block the lower direction.

Before I could gather the strength to attempt another casting, a shockwave of subaudible noise slammed into the Dicathian lines, tossing dozens upon dozens of dwarves and their human and elven allies to the ground. Alacryan mages forged up the highway toward me, sprinting right past the prone soldiers.

“Into the palace!” Lyra’s voice sounded, issuing from the air itself as if she were standing right beside me. “Search every room, every level. We *must* find Arthur Leywin.”

Behind me, the elite palace guard, all mages, moved into position across the palace entrance. They held up rune-etched shields and worked in concert to conjure a magical barrier over the heavy doors, which were being dragged shut behind them.

Making a decision, I rushed forward, weaving between the retreating Dicathians who were being pushed back by the sudden surge. If only I could reach Lyra, I could—

“Caera!”

My gaze snapped around, searching the lines of charging Alacryans. It was with a mixture of relief and horror that I met the eyes of my adoptive mother, Lenora. Corbett was with her, as were Taegen and Arian, my protectors. I recognized soldiers and guards of the Denoir blood interspersed throughout the surrounding battle groups as well.

Fortifying myself with a deep breath, I plunged onward, dodging the occasional spell and avoiding the Dicathians as best I could. My adoptive blood was slowing, other battle groups rushing onward, flowing around them in a tide of magic and steel. Behind, though, those Dicathian soldiers knocked down by the sonic blast were slowly getting back to their feet.

“Arthur isn’t here!” I found myself shouting as soon as I was close enough to make myself heard clearly. “Fall back! He isn’t in Vildorial!”

“Vritra’s horns, Caera, you’re alive,” Lenora gushed, wrapping me in her arms. She was sobbing, I realized, and a cool dread grew in my chest.

“Where’s Lauden?”

Corbett, looking out of place in his ill-fitting leather armor and wielding a shield and spear, blinked several times and wouldn’t look directly at me. “It would seem you and Scythe Seris—*Lady* Seris—inspired in your brother a reckless courage, Caera. He…”

Corbett hesitated, but I already knew what he was going to say. I swallowed down the conflicted emotions Lauden’s sacrifice conjured within me. There would be time to face them later—if we survived.

“You have to fall back,” I forged on. “Retreat from the city if you can. Take your men, as many as will follow you.”

The mask of pain on Corbett’s face cracked. “Did you not hear me? Your brother is already dead, and you would have us meet the same fate? There is no refusing this, Caera.” He suddenly regarded me with suspicion. “Although this does not seem true for everyone equally.”

Lenora stepped in front of him, scowling viciously. “By the Vritra, Corbett, use that blistering intellect that brought me to love you.”

He stared at her, affronted.

Farther down the road, the front line of the Dicathians had been cornered into a knot, now surrounded by our people. The Alacryans who exited the collapsed tunnel were dispersing out into the city with only token opposition.

“Please, listen to me,” I begged him, something I couldn’t recall ever doing in my adult life. “I *heard* the message. And your mission here is already complete, Father. Arthur *isn’t here*, I swear it on my life.”

As the word “father” left my lips, Corbett’s expression softened. “I…of course. I see.” He glanced around at the perimeter of battle groups who had hesitated to move forward without him, all members and servants of the Denoir blood. “Men! Fall back to the portal. Fall back! Our quarry isn’t in the city.”

I suppressed a surprised smile as Lenora wove her arm through mine. Arian gave me a small nod and a quick wink, while Taegan glowered around at the battle still unfolding above and below us on the highway, a big hammer clutched in two white-knuckled fists.

“If I can reach Lyra Dreide, I can—”

A bolt of black and blue flames streaked into our midst, exploding against a quickly conjured shield only inches away. I felt myself lift off the ground and land hard before rolling. With hardly any mana to protect me, the impact with the hard stone felt like being trampled by a herd of wogarts.

Corbett was driven to his knees, while Arian had managed to catch Lenora. Taegen rushed forward, putting himself between my blood and the attacker, but then he hesitated.

There was a glint of flickering silver wire, too fast for a shield to form, and blood spurted from Taegen’s throat. The big warrior looked down at the blood spilling over his chest in confusion, then one hand pressed against his neck. Realization hit him too late, and his hammer clunked against the ground, followed quickly by his knees as he collapsed.

“No…” I breathed out, the effort sending a sharp pain through my ribs and chest.

Still on the ground, I followed the line of Taegen's dead-eyed stare to my great-uncle, Justus. His hair and thick goatee had gone a little more gray since last I'd seen him. His dark eyes flared with rage. Unlike Corbett, Justus wore ornate armor and carried a beautiful sword at his hip. A sliver-thin filament of silver wire orbited around him.

"What in the abyss do you think you're doing?" Lenora snapped, causing Arian to pull her back and shift his footing to ensure he was in front of her. "Explain yourself, Justus! Give us one reason not to—"

Another blue-black ball of fire leapt at them, but several shields appeared this time, absorbing it all. My focus seemed to fade in and out as I searched for the Caster, and when I found her, I could hardly believe what I was seeing.

Aunt Melitta was holding another flame in her hand. The expression of purest hatred on her face would have been enough to take my breath away, if I had caught it to begin with.

"Melitta?" Corbett said in disbelief. He scanned the mages who had gathered around Justus, triggering me to do the same. They were Denoir soldiers, and several members of our extended blood.

"Don't you dare speak to me, *Highlord* Denoir," she snarled, her voice like a scythe through the noise of combat. Looking Corbett in the eye, she spat on the ground. "You've *destroyed* us, you and that witch, Seris."

"What's happened?" Corbett asked, his voice dark with dread.

Tears leaked from Melitta's eyes, and her entire body clenched like a fist. I thought she was going to throw another fireball, but instead the tension burst out of her in a choked yell. "Arden is dead, you bastard! And Colm… Arno…my husband and children, dead. Because of *you*. Because you chose to fight against a *god*."

Corbett paled. The Denoir blood had always been aggressively political and the relationships between blood members fraught with tension, but Corbett and Arden remained steadfastly loyal to one another.

And the little ones. Colm…Arno… "Who would harm children?" I asked, but my voice was lost beneath the waves of sound issuing from the battle

both above and below us.

“The moment you sided with Seris, you damned Highblood Denoir,” Justus said, coiling the silver wire tightly. “But I will reclaim our honor. First, by killing you and all your traitorous unnamed, and then by finding and delivering Arthur Leywin to the High Sovereign.” He slashed with his hands, and the silver filament flashed.

Shields sprang up and spells exploded. Both sides charged, and suddenly a third front to the battle erupted, except this one was Alacryan against Alacryan, blood against blood.

A shockwave knocked me back again, and I felt myself roll several times before sliding to a stop. I reached for my new spellform, and flames danced across my skin, but the effect was weak, and the effort conjured a screaming pain from my core.

Desperately, I searched down the highway for Lyra. If she stepped in, the fighting would have to stop—but there had been a surge of dwarven troops from the city center, and they were pushing up the highway. They had nearly reached the tunnel still issuing Alacryan soldiers, and she was occupied fending them off.

The fight between Seris, Cylrit, and Bairon had moved out of sight. Although I could still feel the waves of their power crashing against one another in the distance, Seris and Cylrit could not help me either.

Slowly, I stood. Corbett was locked in battle with Justus, while Lenora fended off spells from Melitta. Arian was engaged with two Denoir Strikers, and soldiers on both sides fought and died all around them. The crimson blade of my sword rang as it slid from its sheath, two of the silver shards ejected from my bracer and began to orbit around me, and I strode forward with a calm I didn’t feel.

A woman I recognized as one of Justus’s personal guards charged at me, a frosted steel axe held firmly in both hands. Again, I imbued mana into my new spellform, pushing more forcefully this time, and flames spilled out from me, racing along the ground toward the woman. The smoke and fire twisted and danced while forming into several burning silhouettes identical in shape to me.

The Striker hesitated, her focus shifting rapidly between the different apparitions. My blade hissed as it cut the air, and she whirled and brought up her axe, catching the blow. At the same time, a lance of black fire burned into the woman's calf from one of my orbitals. She screamed and went down on one knee, and I kicked her in the chest, sending her sprawling.

"Stop this!" I shouted, trying to imbue my voice with command. "Lay down your arms and *listen*."

"We've listened to you too much already!" Melitta screamed, turning her flames on me even as my own illusory fire was fading. A shield of rapidly whirling dark mana appeared to deflect her fireball back at her. She had to dodge out of the way, and one of their own soldiers was engulfed unexpectedly.

Then blood sprayed the ground, and Corbett fell, a long, snaking gash down his leg.

Justus didn't wait to savor his victory but turned his attention onto me. "You are just as culpable as your adoptive father, you selfish, traitorous girl." Even as he spoke, his silver wire was flashing toward me.

I batted it aside, but the force of the blow made me stumble back. Lenora had bent over Corbett, wrapping them both in a protective barrier, and no other Shield was nearby to protect me. When the next strike came, my block was even more desperate, and I was quickly forced to retreat across the highway.

The plunging edge loomed in my periphery, and I suddenly realized my back was to a hundred-foot fall to the next level of houses.

I blocked again and again, and then suddenly the silver wire had wrapped around my crimson sword. With a sharp tug, the blade went flying, clattering over the stone too far away for me to reach.

Lenora had realized what was happening by now and struggled to come to my aid, but Melitta once again had her pinned down, and it was all she could do to keep herself and Corbett from being burned to ash.

Justus's cold, hate-filled eyes stabbed into my own. "For Highblood Denoir," he said proudly, and his spell flashed.

A thin rapier caught it, deflecting the wire and preventing it from cutting my throat. Arian flourished his weapon, appearing as if from nowhere to step fully in front of me. “Apologies for the delay, my lady. I should’ve come to your aid sooner.”

The wire coiled and snapped at Arian like a sovereign cobra, but my protector’s rapier flashed with blinding speed as he blocked again and again, seeming more than a match for Justus.

A fireball exploded directly in front of us. A rapidly cast shield absorbed part of the blow and kept the heat from incinerating us, but Arian was lifted off his feet and thrown into me. I fell backward, feeling my feet leave solid ground. The road’s edge rose up and away from me as I plummeted beneath it.

In pure desperation, I scrambled to hold onto Arian, who was falling with me. Despite the buffeting wind of our fall whistling past, he twisted with catlike grace, wrapping his arms around me and turning our bodies. I realized too late what he meant to do, but he had crushed my body to his and was supporting my head and neck against his chest. Mana wrapped around him and infused his muscles, extending slightly out to me.

I shut my eyes.

The darkness went red, and I understood only pain as all the air left my lungs. Everything was ringing and moving, and I felt the contents of my stomach erupting up my esophagus. This physical sensation drew my attention to my body, specifically its individual parts, all of which were now in agony.

And yet the fact that I felt pain at all meant I wasn’t done.

I struggled to open my eyes. I was lying on my side, and the first thing I saw was Arian. Blood leaked from his mouth and pooled around his head. His eyes were closed, but there was an uneven rising and falling of his chest.

I experienced no sense of time as I lay there unmoving, thinking only that I needed to get up, needed to help him, but lacking the ability to do so. I was

struggling to breathe, and through all the pain, I could almost feel my pulse weakening.

My body is in shock, I deduced with the air of one discovering a new aspect of magic.

I began homing my senses in on my limbs one at a time. First, I wiggled my toes, then rolled my ankles. When I moved my legs, pain shot through my hips and back. Next, I moved my arms, and finally, I rolled onto my stomach.

Burning claws of agony drove into my abdomen and chest, and I was sick again.

Shaking, I pushed myself up, first to my hands and knees and then, wobbling, onto my feet.

It was a minor miracle that my legs held my weight, but they did. I stumbled and had to support myself against the wall of a carved stone house, but I didn’t fall.

Movement farther down the street I’d landed on pulled my head around, which caused it to swim dangerously and my balance to falter. I leaned my back against the wall and closed my eyes, waiting for the spinning to stop. When I could open them again, I watched a familiar figure with ash-brown hair vault over a rooftop and a white arrow of pure mana launch from her bow.

Taking deep breaths, each one of which made my chest thrum with a deeply inset pain, I cleared my head and pushed myself away from the wall. My only thought was to reach her. Ellie would help me. Alice could heal Arian. Couldn’t she?

The walk down the street seemed to take a lifetime. The noise of battle was everywhere, but there was no fighting directly around me. The road carved into the cavern wall, and I lost sight of Ellie. It wasn’t until I rounded the bend, clearing a row of dwarven homes, that I saw her again.

I stopped, wobbling again as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

“Kids?” I said aloud, certain it was a hallucination or some trick of my injury.

Because it looked to me as if Ellie had taken a handful of the students from Central Academy prisoner. But why would they be in Vildorial?

Everything snapped into place.

“Eleanor!” I gasped, stumbling toward her.

She looked away from her prisoners and let out a horrified gasp, taking a couple of halting steps toward me before remembering to keep her arrow trained on the students. “Caera…but what happened? Are you…” She snapped out of her stupor. “We need to get you to my mom.” To the students, she said, “Pick up your friend. Come on, you’re prisoners of war now. My mom’s an emitter—a healer.”

The students seemed confused and uncertain, but as Ellie let down her bow and rushed to me, taking some of my weight, they complied.

“Arian—my guardian—he needs…”

Mana rushed into me as Ellie activated her spellform, easing the aching of my core. Without conscious effort, the mana then seeped out into my body, helping to ease the pain.

I faded in and out as I sagged onto Ellie in relief, conscious only of putting one foot before the other. The students and Ellie exchanged a few words, but I didn’t comprehend them. We crossed paths with other Alacryans, but they looked at me and passed us by. Then we met Dicathians giving chase, but they looked at Ellie and left us alone as well.

We took a winding, difficult path downward, avoiding the main highway, which was fraught with combat.

I could see the Earthborn Institute, and beyond it, the lower levels of the cavern, when the trembling began. Like an earthquake, it ran through the entire cavern at once. Far below, a perfectly circular hole opened up in the floor of the lowest level, barely visible to me. I squinted, thinking perhaps the hole was in my vision, but something was coming out of it.

Again, I thought it must be the shock or perhaps a concussion, but then the others began speaking as well.

“Vritra’s horns, what is *that?*”

“Is it some kind of beast?”

“But isn’t that a person?”

“Look, there are more of them.”

“Abyss take us, look how many…”

Knowing I wasn’t seeing things, I looked closer. The first creature to crawl out of the hole was lizardlike, though it walked on two hind legs, half again as tall as a man. Except…the mana beast seemed to be only an organic component of something else. Glowing veins traced its scales, which were pale gray, as if bleached of all color. The chest was covered in a thick, rune-etched plate of blue-gray metal, but the stomach was open, revealing a mechanical substructure beneath the organic surface, shielded by a gently glowing layer of transparent mana.

The lower jaw had been removed, revealing more of the translucent mana. Through it, I could barely see the concentrating face of a young man, his eyes hidden behind a rune-covered band.

His arms, too, were slightly visible through gaps within the organic mana beast flesh and underlying substructure of gray-blue metal, where more translucent mana protected the inner arms of the mana beast—I wasn’t sure what to call it. *Armor? An exoskeleton of some sort?* Clutched in one overlarge, clawed fist was a sword too big for an unadorned to comfortably wield, but which fit the large mana beast perfectly.

“Is that a person?” Ellie asked with a shiver. “There's no mana coming from them, yet they're releasing such a strong aura. But how…?”

My tongue felt thick in my mouth as I spoke. “So, this is Gideon’s secret project.”

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HUNTED

ELEANOR LEYWIN

“Is that a person?” A shiver ran down my spine as I realized what I was seeing. “There's no mana coming from them, yet they're releasing such a strong aura. But how…?”

“So, this is Gideon’s secret project,” Caera said beside me, the words thick in her mouth.

I shot the young woman with the short golden hair a worried look. “We need to get you all to a healer.” Hesitant, still not quite sure what these Alacryans were thinking, I added, “It…looks like the battle is turning.”

The lizard-person-*thing* was so fast that it had already reached the highway, leaping twenty feet in the air to clear a little pastry shop and land on the embankment right in front of several groups of Alacryans who had reached the lowest levels.

The Alacryans began to throw spells, but the many streaks of orange, green, and red mostly bounced off the gray scales. The thing—soldier? Suit? I couldn’t make up my mind what to call it—spun, swiping away two Strikers with a single blow of its tail and showing us its back, which had a framework of some kind of metal fixed right into the flesh, scales, meat,

and bone. Any gaps in the steel and flesh were covered by more of the transparent mana barrier.

A second of the human-piloted mana beast suits reached the battle. This one had thick bleached-gray fur, missing in tufts. The arms were powerfully built and supported with more metal, and armor plates were inset into its flesh across its broad chest and ribs. Tusks protruded to each side of the pilot's face, where the mana beast's wide jaw would have been. It cleared a ten-foot jump with ease, soaring past a Striker to crush and gore a Shield.

More of the strange, somewhat grotesque, things came out, and soon a small army was sweeping the Alacryans from the streets. I probably should have felt relief, or even glory at the victory, but really all I felt was a faint queasiness, which moved into my head and made me dizzy.

Searching inside, I realized I'd depleted more of my mana than I'd first thought. Within my body, five spheres of mana burned brightly, each one sitting at a primary intersection of my mana channels. I reached for one of these spheres, which I had painstakingly gathered and stored within myself. When my consciousness touched one, it melted away into pure mana, which then rushed through my channels and into my core, revitalizing me.

My grip on Caera tightened. "Come on, we need to find Mom. Boo's with her, hopefully still at the Earthborn Institute where I left her. We're almost there."

"But my guardian…" Caera looked over her shoulder, back in the direction from which she'd originally appeared.

In turn, I shot a pointed look at the rest of our group: the two Alacryan boys carrying the unconscious girl with the short golden hair, Mayla, and Caera herself, who could barely stand even with the mana I'd given her. I knew I could condense mana into a kind of litter to carry her friend, but it was already going to be a difficult journey. "We'll have to send someone when we reach the institute."

Caera reluctantly nodded, and I started moving away cautiously, leading the group of Alacryans toward shelter and, hopefully, my mom.

We hadn’t gone far when one of the pilots, this one in a silver-furred mana beast much like a bear, its torso open but shrouded with the transparent barrier, its insides supported by a structure of bluish metal, charged up to us. Thankfully he recognized me—although I wasn’t sure how he could see with the rune-embroidered cloth across his eyes—and quickly accepted that I had taken the group of wounded, tired young Alacryans prisoners before moving off again.

We made it to the level of the Earthborn Institute, not far from its gates, and I was surprised to see them shut. Still supporting the majority of Caera’s weight, I shouted up at the guards. “Hey! Open up, I have wounded prisoners who need to reach the emitter, Alice Leywin!”

A dwarf with a trimmed black beard and flat, crooked nose peered out of an arrow slit, his helm scraping the sides of the narrow opening. “The Earthborn Institute is in lockdown, Eleanor! I can’t unseal the doors until Lord Carnelian himself releases the hold!”

I gaped up at the guard, whose name was Bolgermud. “Is my mom still here?”

He blanched. “I’ve heard her yelling even through the inner doors. I believe it was her intention to join the fighting, or at least get out there to utilize her skills as a healer, but she was caught within when Lord Earthborn locked the institute down.”

I turned around to look at my “prisoners.” Although their curse hadn’t been set off by their “defeat,” I couldn’t be confident that they weren’t still a threat, or that they themselves weren’t in danger.

My eyes slid off them to where more of the mana beast pilots were fighting in the distance, pushing the Alacryans back and hunting them through the city. Perhaps it didn’t matter; Gideon’s secret project seemed to have been a success, and although the battle hadn’t been won yet, it wouldn’t take too long now. Still, I couldn’t seem to release the knot that had formed in my stomach.

“Is there somewhere else we can go?” Mayla asked, her voice small. “Enola needs help. She’s…”

“There’ll be an emitter or two up in Lodenhold,” I answered, knowing I didn’t sound entirely confident. “We might be able to reach the palace, if the fighting isn’t too bad…”

“Seris,” Caera said, her voice raspy with pain and fatigue. “We should find Seris. Or Lyra. They need to…know everything. They can end the fighting.”

Remembering the presence of the two powerful Alacryans, who were supposed to be my brother’s allies, I searched for the signs of their battle only to realize that I could no longer sense it. Activating the first phase of my beast will, I drew on the senses of a guardian beast and scanned the city. Following the signs of where the powerful mages had clashed, I sensed the distant but muted mana signatures of white core mages.

“Lance Bairon has driven them into some of the side tunnels.” I pointed. “There, where that barrier is completely shattered.”

Caera had closed her eyes and was frowning with concentration. “I can barely sense anything. I’m too weak.”

Nerves gripped me like the claws of the mechanized mana beasts now battling the Alacryan invaders all across the city, but I shook them off. My own life, and the lives of those following me, relied on me keeping a level head.

Since there was no point in begging Bolgermud, I instead inspected the smooth stone walls of the Earthborn Institute’s outer courtyard. They were twenty feet high at least, with no grooves or imperfections for getting a handhold. There was no way I could get Caera or the injured girl over. There were the newly installed bunkers, but we’d have to go all the way through the city to reach them. And even if we did, would there be any emitters there? Enola needed help immediately.

“We have to do *something*,” the boy with the dark skin—Valen, I thought they’d called him— said, tense as a drawn bow. “We can’t just stand here and wait for one side or the other to decide to attack us.”

“No one is going to attack you—” I started, but my words turned into a yelp as dark fire suddenly rained from the air, splashing against the Earthborn

Institute’s outer walls. I threw up a shield of bright white mana around us, and Seth conjured a barrier beneath mine. “What the…”

I felt the fire burning through my mana like it was alive inside my mana veins.

“Soulfire,” Caera gasped. She was frantically searching the cavern for the spell’s source. “But who…?”

I gritted my teeth so hard they hurt, giving every ounce of my concentration to holding the barrier in place. The black flames—soulfire—kept burning through in small patches even as I absorbed a second of the mana reservoirs, and it was only due to Seth’s secondary barrier that we weren’t engulfed. It was the most powerful spell I’d ever felt, and it wasn’t even targeted toward us; the flames were raining down over half of Vildorial.

On a level below us, I watched as the gray fur of an upright thorned growler, which was supported by a complex exoskeletal structure of the bluish steel and mechanical parts I couldn’t describe, dissolved beneath the flames. The translucent barriers of mana shrouding the pilot within fizzled away, and then the flames ate into the pilot too. The suit and pilot collapsed, neither moving again.

Suddenly the fiery rain faded, and I released the shield with a gasp. There were several explosions all at once, and three of the stone-shrouded passageways out of the city burst inward with a hail of rock and dust. Soldiers in the black and crimson of Alacrya began to pour through in groups of three and four.

I gaped at Caera and the others, but I could tell from their expressions that they were just as surprised as I was.

The soldiers piloting the mana beast suits began to turn away from the route of the first Alacryans and back toward the new arrivals, but even I could see that they were struggling to organize. This fresh wave of enemies was more disciplined and dedicated to the fight, and they showed no inclination to break free of the defense and into the city, instead taking the fight directly to any Dicathians they saw.

The closest of the breached tunnels was only a level below us, and already the Alacryans were spilling up the road. We would be trapped with our backs against the massive iron gates, and there was no way we'd reach the bunkers now.

"We need to head back up, toward the palace," I said, finally deciding on a course. "If we avoid the highway, we can probably stay away from the advancing forces and the worst of the fighting until we're almost there." As I spoke, I reached out for Boo, mentally calling him. Knowing Mom was safe inside the Earthborn Institute gave me the confidence to summon him away from her, and the big guardian bear appeared beside me with a faint *pop*.

I scratched him between the eyes. "Thanks, big guy."

He rumbled, then his small dark eyes landed dangerously on the others aside from Caera. They backed away nervously.

I turned to lead them back up the cavern, but three Alacryan battle groups had already broken away and were quickly marching toward us. Behind them, two of the mana beast machines slammed into the front lines of the larger force.

"You're my prisoners, and your mission in this city is over. If you try to escape, I'll have no choice but to kill you," I said, trying to add a level of fierceness to my voice that I didn't feel.

Caera suddenly took me roughly by the arm and began marching in the direction of the other Alacryans.

"What are you doing?" I hissed nervously. Boo rumbled, bristling.

She shot me a glare. "Just play along," she said from the corner of her mouth. The sudden hostility didn't extend to her tone of voice.

I steadied my breathing, trusting her completely.

"You there, who is in command of this force?" Caera yelled when the Alacryan soldiers were still fifty feet or more away. "There is no sign of our target here. Report to your commander; we're falling back."

A short, thick woman who could have been mistaken for a dwarf eyed Caera's horns. "A Vritra-blooded among the rebels and traitors? That's a surprise. And a damned shame. No mind, though. I've got my orders and you've got yours. Do your bloody job or the High Sovereign will light you up like a candle, isn't that right?"

"I've *done* my job," Caera insisted, holding herself firmly, her presence commanding despite her fatigue. "The signal needs to be sent. Lance Arthur Leywin isn't in—"

"Wait a second," the woman interrupted, her focus settling on me. Her eyes flicked between me and Boo, then went wide. "You've captured one of our targets. How'd you do that then?" Instead of waiting for an answer, she looked at the man next to her, a wire-thin mage wearing dark battlerobes with crimson pauldrons and blood-red chain lining peeking through. "That's her, isn't it? The sister? She's even got the bear, like they said."

I felt my eyes widening before I could stop myself. "What?"

"It is!" the woman said, practically shouting. "Hand her over. We'll deliver her to Scythe Melzri directly."

Caera glanced at me, caught wrong-footed. I gave the smallest of nods.

Spinning, I ripped my arm free of her grip, unslung my bow from my shoulder, drew, and fired at the enemy soldier's throat before her brows even finished rising.

A shield of green-tinged wind enveloped my target as the thin man cast a spell, and my arrow burst against it.

Caera lunged forward, her hands sprouting black flames. At the same time, she melted away among several ghostly copies of herself, each one drawn in gray fire. The stout woman was bringing up her gauntleted fists to defend herself, but Caera reappeared right in front of her, and her flame-wreathed hand pierced the shield and wrapped around the woman's throat.

The black fire didn't burn the woman's flesh. Instead, it almost looked like it was being drawn into her pores.

The soldier let out a choked gasp. One gauntleted fist slammed into Caera's chest. Blue hair waved like a flag as Caera was tossed backward, a secondary shield appearing far too late to help dampen the blow as Seth struggled to react in time.

Caera hit the ground hard, her breath rushing out in a pained gasp.

I dodged away from a blast of concussive sound, threw out three small discs of condensed mana, tucked into a roll, and came back up to my feet with an arrow of golden light against the string of my bow. Caera struggled to stand as the arrow struck her in the chest. It melted against her body and wrapped around her, giving her a protective layer of pure mana.

The stout Alacryan soldier was already on the ground, black fire dancing from her mouth, nose, and eyes. I could *feel* the mana burning in her flesh.

Boo let out a resounding roar and charged.

The Shield cursed and started to fall back. "Melzri wants the girl alive if possible, but don't hesitate to kill her if necessary."

Several of the other Alacryans surged forward, weapons drawn and spells prepared. The discs of mana exploded, sending the two remaining Strikers and one Caster flying as the Shields struggled to react. Boo pounced on the fallen Caster, who was only saved by a gleaming shield of black stone that formed a dome over them.

A winged creature flashed by overhead, diving into the chaos and tossing the remaining Alacryans aside. *The dragons!* I thought, my heart in my throat.

But it wasn't a dragon. Nor was it a beast; at least, not entirely.

The mechanical mana beast form stood at least nine feet tall and looked kind of like a lithe griffon standing on its hind legs. Steel-gray feathered wings opened out to its sides like scythes, and as it spun the feathers sliced through a barrier of gusting wind and then the thin Shield behind it. The form wielded a huge glowing orange sword in one taloned foreclaw, which it brought down on a reeling Striker. The big Alacryan seemed infantile next to the huge machine, and his mana-imbued blade like a child's toy.

Steel sparked, and the Striker's arm gave way a moment before glowing hot steel parted his flesh from shoulder to hip.

A sparkling ball of lightning glanced off the gray feathers and flew harmlessly away. One wing came around to block a steaming ball of black ice and metal spikes. As the machine spun, I saw through the transparent mana sheathing where the beast's throat used to be to the woman within. Although her eyes were covered by the same rune-etched band of silk I'd seen on the other pilots, I still recognized her: Claire Bladeheart.

I'd seen her around the labs while working with Gideon and Emily to test my spellform. I didn't know her, but I knew *about* her, especially how her core had been destroyed years ago, during the attack on Xyrus Academy that caused Arthur to be arrested by the Lances. But watching her move now, I wouldn't have guessed that she had no magic of her own; she fought like a silver core augmenter.

With the talons of her free claw, she ripped open an enemy Caster, then did a kind of mid-air pirouette. At the conclusion of the spin, several feathers launched from her wings like arrows. A few pinged off the two barriers being conjured by the enemy Shields, but more struck home, dropping three of the enemy mages in a single strike.

A woman wrapped in conjured stone-and-metal armor and spikes threw herself on Claire's back and pummeled spiked fists into the mana barrier covering parts of her exposed lower back, which could be seen through a mesh of mechanical braces.

Shaking off the horrified awe of the fight, I sent an arrow of pure mana through the last Striker's eye. She went limp and slumped off Claire, who proceeded to wade through the remaining Alacryans with brutal efficiency.

When the last Shield fell and the dome of obsidian collapsed, Boo's jaws closed over the final mage's skull with a wet crunch, then he returned to my side, sniffing the air warily as he regarded Claire.

She, in turn, was scanning our surroundings. Apparently deciding it was safe enough for the moment, she turned the griffon's beaked face toward me.

“Eleanor Leywin. You shouldn’t be out here,” she said. Her voice was muffled and distorted, almost as if she were speaking to me from under water. The griffon’s head shifted slightly so Claire’s face pointed toward Caera, who was still on one knee. “And Lady Caera Denoir. You very likely shouldn’t be either. You would both make likely targets for the enemy.”

“These mages”—I indicated the field of corpses—“said they were looking for me.”

Claire nodded once, sharply, the beak of her machine scything down. “Then we need to get you to safety. I can carry you, but only you.”

“I’ve got injured with me,” I hurried to say. “These two both need healers immediately. If you could guide us to the palace, help guard us, we could—”

Suddenly Claire was spinning and bringing her blade up to deflect a blow I hadn’t even seen coming. The shockwave threw me off my feet, and I landed on my back hard enough to knock the air from my lungs. When I looked up, I found myself on the edge of a crater that had been smashed into the street outside the Earthborn Institute.

Claire was face down at the center of the crater. A woman with pure white hair and jet-black horns stood over her. The woman’s dark eyes were full of disgust as she regarded the combination of organic mana beast and magical mechanisms that supported it. Through the transparent patches of mana along the back of the torso, I could see Claire struggling inside.

The same black flames from before wreathed one of the woman’s long curved swords. She raised the blade over Claire’s helpless form, then brought it down with a flash of dark fire.

Clang!

Wind blew through my hair from the force of the strike and nausea threatened to overwhelm me.

The fire-wreathed sword was hovering a foot and a half above the back of Claire’s neck. A crimson spear had appeared beneath it, catching the blow. Lance Bairon held the spear’s haft with both hands, and bright blue lightning ran across the surface of the armor covering his straining arms.

The woman regarded him with red-rimmed eyes. When she spoke, her voice was thick with fatigue. “For my sister’s death, I’ve come to claim several deaths in return, as I am owed. I will start with yours, Thunderlord.”

Bairon grunted as he pushed her sword up and away, forcing her back a step. “Evil begets evil, Scythe. You can’t hope to live a life of dealing death without that same death eventually finding you.”

She shifted her stance to something a little more cautious and began to circle around him, creating a clear path toward us. “Evil?” She scoffed, jaded. “The High Sovereign wants Arthur Leywin’s core, but I don’t give a shit about any of that. Leywin killed Viessa, and so I am honor-bound to kill his sister. After that, all these asura can choke on their own blood for all I care.”

Bairon’s back foot shifted, and stone cracked beneath him as he pushed off, driving the crimson spear forward in multiple quick thrusts. The Scythe I assumed to be Melzri blocked and countered with the burning sword even as her second blade became wrapped in cutting lines of black wind. This second sword snapped out, and the black wind carved the air all around us.

I curled into a ball where I lay, instinctively pushing outward with mana to form a silvery bubble. The bombardment of cuts and slashes tore my mana to ribbons in an instant. A heavy, furry presence crushed down on me, pressing me into the street. Metal screamed as it was ripped apart, and something heavy struck the ground hard enough to make it tremble beneath me.

I couldn’t open my eyes, but I felt each release of mana like a physical blow to my chest. Pained grunts, desperate moans, and frightened screams issued from all around me, but I couldn’t move even an inch as spellfire tore the street to shreds.

This isn’t the Relictombs, I thought with sudden desperation. *If I die here, I won’t just step out of a portal to try again…*

The desperate thought seemed to sap my strength and clutch at my lungs, making it impossible to catch my breath. I couldn’t fight Scythes or retainers or Wraiths like Arthur could. I wasn’t even as strong as Claire or

Caera. And I'd never get that strong if I died huddled on the ground, fear pumping into me with every painful squeeze of my heart…

Boo's pain leaked through our shared connection.

My eyes snapped open. Through Boo's shaggy fur, I could just make out Seth huddled nearby, his focus on holding a shield around Valen and Enola, both of whom were lying unmoving on the ground. Mayla was crawling away from us toward where the gates of the Earthborn Institute had collapsed under the weight of Melzri's attacks.

"Let me up, Boo, we have to move!" I shouted, struggling to free myself. The heavy weight and dense fur eased off, and I scrambled forward toward Seth and the others. "Grab the boy," I ordered my companion as I absorbed another of my stored mana reservoirs and imbued mana into my body.

Boo grabbed Valen, lifting him up like a mother shadow panther carrying her kittens as I threw Enola over my shoulder and held out my hand to Seth. He stared at it for what felt like forever, then grabbed it and let himself be pulled up.

Caera was ahead of me, lifting Mayla and dragging one arm around her shoulder so she could support the younger girl's weight.

I flinched as a shadow fell over me, but when I glanced backward, I found Claire, blood-stained but on her feet again, her wings spread wide as she tried to shield us from behind. "Go!" she shouted, pressing a huge talon against my back.

Instinctively, my gaze tracked across the mechanism she piloted. It was generating its own shielding barrier from within, but the potent aura of mana it was giving off was weakening by the second as blades of wind bit into her. Uncertain it would work, I pushed out my own mana, targeting the core of the machine—a beast core, I assumed, and a very powerful one at that.

My mana infused the beast core, and the machine's aura intensified. There was no time to wonder about the specifics, and I drained yet another of my mana reserves and hurried my pace, quickly catching up with Mayla and Caera as we tried to flee into the now-open outer courtyard of the Earthborn

Institute, which would at least give us some shelter from the rapid-fire battle happening behind us.

A force of dwarves filled the dust-choked gap where the institute gates had been. “Inside, inside!” Bolgermud shouted, waving to us.

Seth shot me an uncertain glance, and I pushed his back, urging him onward. We all broke into a hobbling jog, moving between the lines of dwarves with their weapons bared. They fell into position across the opening after we’d passed, magic humming around them as they focused on defensive spells.

Outside of the collapsed gates, Lance Bairon moved like a lightning bolt, and Melzri responded as a tornado of black fire and wind, their exchanges little more than a blur of mana-tinged motion that even my enhanced senses could not follow.

In the face of such power, the tall walls seemed like little comfort.

We huddled behind the dwarves, alone at the center of the large barren courtyard that led down into the institute and our home there. Valen stirred when Boo set him roughly on the ground, then sat up blearily. I eased Enola down beside him more carefully; she was still unconscious, her skin pale and clammy. Mayla and Seth hurried over to administer what care they could to their friends.

I didn’t dare waste even a moment of the brief reprieve, and I started absorbing mana. By activating my spellform, I could pull it more quickly and hurry its purification. But I only had moments before a horn was blasting, resounding throughout the entire cavern, seeming to issue from the stones themselves and filling the air with a crackling tension.

“That’s the signal the city has been cleared,” Seth said breathlessly, looking around as if expecting an explanation to manifest out of the dust. “At least for those of us who came with Seris. They should begin pulling out of the city now!”

Mayla let out a breath of relief that turned to squirming pain. She reached around and clutched clumsily at the small of her back, which was flickering with visible displays of light.

Caera grabbed the girl's face in both hands, forcing Mayla to look at her. "This isn't over. Mission parameters have changed. You need to retreat from the city and await further orders, but you are a prisoner of war. *Think* it, girl."

Mayla squeezed her eyes shut tight, a look of intense concentration on her face. The rest of us watched breathlessly until, a few seconds later, the crackling light along her spine faded.

Shouts from the line of dwarven guards drew my attention as a line of cutting void wind crashed into them, ripping up the stonework but just missing any of them as Bairon managed to deflect part of the mana. My hands slapped over my ears at the following thunderclap, and Melzri vanished in a flash of light that left the image of a crimson spear imprinted on my eyeballs.

Following the flash, the world seemed to go green, and I blinked, trying to get rid of the afterimage. The green fog now clouding my vision only thickened, until the dwarves were nearly hidden from sight. That's when the screaming started.

The green tint wasn't an after-effect of the flash, but a thickly pooling noxious gas that was swallowing our dwarven defenders. As I watched, their exposed skin began to darken, then blister and burst open in bloody boils. One by one, they clawed at their faces, eyes, and throats before collapsing. Out of the mist, stepping heedlessly through their remains, came a creature that seemed to have crawled up from my deepest nightmares.

She had stick-thin limbs that stuck out at exaggerated angles like a spider. Thin, damp, swamp-green hair clung to the sides of her malformed face, and rags of dark cloth were practically glued to her jutting ribs.

"R-retainer Bivrae…" Seth stammered. Despite his terror, he conjured a shield between us and the horrible woman.

She bared her teeth in what might have been an evil grin, then swept a clawed hand through the air. The shield shattered, and Seth let out a pained gasp.

Caera stood between us and the retainer. Ghostly flames danced along her body and the ground around her.

The retainer cocked her head and sniffed like a wild mana beast, inspecting Caera warily.

As I watched her move, recognition sparked in my mind: she looked like the retainer Tessia had fought in Elenoir, and like his brother, the one Boo and I had killed.

With a bestial snarl, the retainer lunged to her left, slashing her claws in the air. Caera melted away into shadowy flames, which parted as cutting mana sliced through where Caera had been only an instant before. There was a glint of silver, and beams of black fire launched at Bivrae. The retainer batted them aside, and her dark eyes turned to the rest of us.

Boo charged with a roar, but she caught him by the snout with one hand, spun with snake-strike quickness, and hurled him away using the force of his own weight and momentum. I drew and fired, my golden arrow nearly parting Bivrae's bedraggled hair before impacting Boo and wrapping him in a protective barrier only an instant before he crashed into the guard tower and was swallowed by an avalanche of stone.

Claire, towering over the retainer in her mechanical monstrosity, brought down the glowing orange blade in an overhand arc. Bivrae skittered out of the way, but Claire whirled a wing, the sharp feathers spread out wide, the cutting edge sweeping directly at Bivrae's neck.

The retainer dipped beneath the attack, ripped her claws through the machine's left leg, which was covered in fur and had a paw like a world lion, and then breathed out a spray of acidic bile that stuck to the machine wherever it touched and began eating into the barrier of mana.

I watched this with one eye, searching for the best opportunity to assist. With the other eye, I was scanning our surroundings, trying to keep track of my companions and the fight beyond the gates.

Seth was huddled over the others, his shield wrapping them all in a dome of mana. Caera flashed around the battlefield, hidden within her illusory flames and sending lances of soulfire at Bivrae's back. I tried not to look at

the group of dwarves, including Bolgermud; they were all dead, and their corpses were a gruesome sight.

There was a surge of mana from Claire’s griffon-suit. Her wings beat, lifting her a few feet up in the air as she avoided a slash to her throat, then the oversized sword exploded with a dry heat I could feel from thirty feet away. The suit's aura was suddenly visibly as a wavering gray light emanating from within it, and an orange echo of the blade followed it as it moved.

I released my mana arrow.

It split into two. Those two split, and then split again, and the resulting barrage sank into the solid stone of the courtyard tiles.

Claire surged down in an orange and gray blur. Bivrae started to skitter away, then the field of arrows began to explode around her, knocking her off balance. Both sword and the talon clutching it hitched in midair as they came into contact with the mana cladding Bivrae’s gray skin, then hot steel sizzled through flesh, muscle, and into bone as the sword lodged in Bivrae’s shoulder.

The retainer gave an inhuman screech as a nova of venomous green mana exploded out of her. Claire was sent flying backward, end over end, and landed in a heap, her wings tangled.

Slowly, Bivrae straightened. She glanced at the black blood flowing from her wound, then seemed to discard it. A black-fire lance bore down on her, but she deflected it back at Caera, whose illusory flames had faded, and Caera was forced to leap out of the way.

Bivrae focused on me again.

“Run!” I shouted to anyone who would listen, but I didn’t follow my own advice. Instead, I stepped toward the retainer, outwardly calm, hoping to keep her attention on me.

But instead of listening to me, Seth was hurrying to the collapsed mana beast machine. The mana barriers that helped to bind the construct together had all faded, and there was no longer any hint of an aura emanating from

the beast core inside it. But Claire was still moving within the prone mechanism.

I drew the string of my bow and conjured an arrow against it. “Did you have two brothers?” I asked, playing for time.

The horrible woman’s head turned too far to the side as she regarded me silently.

“I think I met them,” I continued, my limbs trembling slightly. “My friend, Tessia, killed one. The retainer. She’s the Legacy now.”

Bivrae scowled, and she began to walk toward me.

“Maybe you don’t know,” I said, resisting the urge to take a step back. “But your other brother…*I* killed him, not Tessia.”

She stopped, her clawed fingers twitching. “Impossible. You are a gnat.”

Caera had moved to Valen and Enola and was dragging them as far away from the combat as possible. Seth was helping Claire disentangle herself from the machine, both of them wrapped in his shield spell. Behind Bivrae, Boo shook himself free of the rubble, his small eyes jumping from me to the retainer and back. His urge to attack burned angrily in my mind.

“Maybe, but I’ve proven pretty hard to swat so far, witch.” The arrow flew with the soft hum of my bowstring.

Bivrae flowed away from it, not moving her feet but contorting her torso to avoid the strike. The arrow exploded just behind her, and Boo charged through the white mana, slamming into Bivrae from behind. I hit him with another barrier arrow just as her claws came around to bite into his side, and his jaws closed on her shoulder.

Pulling from my last mana reservoir, I loosened arrow after arrow, forcing them full of mana so they exploded around Bivrae’s feet and head, knowing I couldn’t do much damage but keeping her off balance as best I could as I sprinted for Caera.

A resonant hum came from the mana infusing the charwood doors leading into the Earthborn Institute itself, and they burst open with enough force to

crack the facade. Dozens of dwarves spilled out with a thunderous battle cry and began hurling spells and weapons at the retainer. Trapped in Boo's jaws, she couldn't avoid the battery of attacks, and small wounds appeared all over her twisted body.

Relief washed through me, though not because of the reinforcements. Over the heads of the small army of Earthborn soldiers, near the rear of the long entrance hall, being held back by Hornfels Earthborn, I could see my mother. Her eyes locked onto mine, and I felt her distress like a fist around my heart, but also relief and, more importantly, even *trust*. In that instant of connection, all her emotions seemed to flood into me, and I felt the same burst of confidence I got when Boo infused me with his will.

Seth and Claire made it to the doors, while Caera supported Valen with one arm and had Enola draped over her other shoulder. Turning to face the battle, I followed behind the others through the lines of dwarves while continuing to release arrow after arrow, some targeting the retainer, others fortifying Boo, who was absorbing the brunt of her fury.

I was halfway across the entrance chamber and could hear my mother shouting for me when the wall into the institute burst apart.

Everything was flying stone, steel, and fire. I lost the sense of up and down and my vision went white as pain override all my other senses.

Blinking rapidly, I searched around myself, trying to get some sense of what had happened. Dust choked the air and lightning crackled across the floor, through which a kind of trench had been dug up out of the tiled floor. Little black fires burned everywhere I looked. The Earthborn soldiers were scattered across the floor like abandoned ragdolls.

In a crater at the far side of the room was Lance Bairon.

An overwhelming mana signature approached. I turned toward the source, where the entire front of the Earthborn Institute had been blasted away. A silhouette floated within the dust, one arm holding the other, the figure's posture seeming fatigued even hanging in the air. As she drifted forward, her dark eyes came clear.

Scythe Melzri was staring down at me, and only me.

43

CAUGHT

THE SCYTHE, Melzri, drifted forward through the thick clouds of dust. The front wall of the Earthborn Institute was a ruin beneath her, the rubble strewn with prone dwarven warriors. Her stark white hair was pink with blood, and she supported one arm with the other even as she flew. She was entirely focused on me, her expression cold and businesslike. There was something so terrible about the simple math of her bloodlust that I had to look away.

Seth and Mayla were nearby, half trapped under a pile of broken stone tiles, a quivering bubble shield holding back the heavy chunks of crumbling wall. Seth grimaced in concentration, his eyes shut tight, sweat scoring little lines through the muddy dust caking his face. Mayla was tucked into the crook of his arm.

Boo growled furiously as he dragged himself free of the rubble. The Alacryan student, Valen, was in the hollow Boo's body left behind. I couldn't tell if he was alive or dead.

I didn't see Caera, Claire, or Enola anywhere.

Rocks sliding beneath unsteady feet drew my gaze to the rear of the room. Mom was picking herself up off the ground, her own wide eyes tracking

quickly across the chamber until she found me. She seemed to shrink as she let out a breath, then her focus shifted, and her face transformed with fright.

My head snapped back around. Melzri was flying just above me. Bivrae's spiderish silhouette was visible behind her, lurking ominously in the dust-choked void.

There was a roar from Boo, and he threw himself at the Scythe, claws out and fangs bared. She vanished, only to reappear on the other side of me. She reached down to grab me, but instead of closing around the front of my leather armor, her pale fingers wrapped around a bright line of silver that appeared above me. We both regarded the manifestation with some confusion, then the silver line twisted violently, jerking out of her hand and sending her reeling back.

Boo stepped over me as Silverlight settled onto my chest, motionless once again. Mom scrambled to my side a moment later, healing magic already glowing around her hands. Bairon, leaning on the crimson spear, appeared in the corner of my eye.

My breathing eased as the scrapes and deep bruising of the explosion were washed away by Mom's touch.

"It's okay, Eleanor, we're here," Caera said from somewhere behind me as Hornfels moved aside the rocks crushing down on Seth and Mayla, freeing them.

Melzri let out a manic laugh, half-turning toward Bivrae, still mostly hidden in the cloud of dust. "You've got to be *kidding* me. Do you all really plan to die for this brat?"

No one moved. No one spoke. Pressure built and built in my chest until it threatened to push tears from my eyes as I considered the people around me. Using Silverlight like a cane, I pushed myself up. Mom tried to move in front of me, but I rested my free hand on her shoulder. She searched my eyes, an emotional alchemy of terror, acceptance, and desperation reflected in her own. It was a look that told me, quite clearly, that even though she knew she couldn't protect us from this enemy, she would die trying, and she was at peace with that.

But I wasn’t.

With a gentle but firm pressure, I encouraged her to move aside and stepped forward. A low moan like a whine quivered from Boo, but he stayed where he was. My left hand balled into a tight fist around Silverlight, still in the shape of an unstrung bow; I had no idea where my other weapon had ended up. “Killing me won’t bring your sister back.”

Melzri regarded me as if I’d told her that two and two made green. “Bring her *back*?” She scoffed. “You misunderstand. I had no love for Viessa, nor she for me. Your death simply balances the scales. It is a duty, not some wrath-filled pursuit of a broken heart. I am Vritra-born, a *Scythe*, not some angry child storming across both continents seeking revenge.”

“I am Vritra-born as well,” Caera said, her voice strong even if her mana signature radiated weakly. “But there is no need to be a slave to the Vritra clan’s selfish wishes just because their black blood runs in my veins. Scythe Viessa died doing the High Sovereign’s bidding, did she not? Blame him for your misfortune, not—”

“Oh shut up,” the Scythe snapped. A muscle twitched in her jaw, making her look slightly crazed. “I’m tired, and I’m sick of this pointless fight. Either let the girl die, or die to prolong her life by mere moments. Either way, do so quickly and quietly because your whining exhausts me.”

A sudden chill swept through the chamber, like a dark cloud had just crossed over the sun. I felt an outpouring of power from the city behind Melzri, then a mass shifting of mana. As I instinctively focused more fully on my enhanced senses, I felt the distant army of mana signatures snuffing out like so many candles.

Mayla gasped, sinking to her knees. One of her spellforms was active, radiating mana. Her eyes were shut tight but moving rapidly behind the lids. “The battle, it’s—”

I’d felt people die before, but this was different. Someone had done something, figured something out…

“Tell her,” I urged Mayla, taking another step toward Melzri. I knew the Scythe could snap me in two before I’d even see her move, but she’d

already fallen into the trap of talking instead of fighting. Seris and Cylrit were still out there, along with Lyra. And an entire army of beast core-powered Dicathian warriors. If I could just delay her long enough… “Tell her what you see, Mayla.”

“Clouds of black mist spilling from Lady Seris,” Mayla said at once, her voice raspy. “Like an army of locusts, burrowing into their skin and eating their mana.”

Melzri’s expression darkened, and she turned away, looking out through the smashed entrance.

Only then did I notice that a different silhouette was standing where the retainer had been only a moment ago. A sharp-angled lump of a body lay in a heap at the newcomer’s feet, emitting no mana signature.

Melzri sneered. “Cylrit. Stabbing poor Bivrae in the back? How dishonorable of you.”

“I come with a message from Lady Seris,” Cylrit said, stepping forward. His black hair was windblown and messy from the battle, and his armor had several deep gashes in it. “She would like to speak to you herself, and asks that you wait until she has resolved her current task before you do anything that can’t be undone.”

Melzri blinked at him, her grip tightening around the two swords she carried. She spoke mechanically as she turned her back on him, saying, “I’ll do my duty.”

Cylrit flew forward, his sword a dark blur. Both of hers came up to deflect the blow, then Cylrit slid to a stop between her and us. “You need not wait long,” he said, his voice as level as if they were having this discussion across a cup of tea, not at the point of each other’s blades.

“Scythe Melzri Vritra.”

Yet another person appeared, limping out through the obscuring clouds. Her pearl hair and white robes seemed to glow with some inner light, banishing the dust as she passed through it.

Melzri turned again, watching her approach with an inscrutable expression. “Seris, unnamed, fugitive and blood traitor,” she said, sucking her teeth in annoyance.

With her focus on Seris, I let my right hand inch toward where the string would appear if Silverlight had one.

“Stand down, Melzri,” Seris said warily.

“You don’t give orders here,” Melzri replied in the same tone. “I’ll have the blood I’m owed.”

My fingertips pinched the air, searching for a string I couldn’t see. *Please, Silverlight. You chose me, so* help *me.* I wouldn’t just stand there like frozen prey if Seris couldn’t talk Melzri down.

Pearl hair spilled over the bright white shoulder pads of Seris’s battlerobes as she shook her head. “If your heart beats so fiercely for blood, why didn’t you kill the Lance?”

“Because *you* have interrupted me!” Melzri barked, but something in the catch of her voice told me she wasn’t telling the truth.

Bairon stiffened, looking affronted. “Our battle wasn’t finished yet, Scythe.”

“You have not killed him because he is interesting to you,” Seris said in the same tone Mom used when I was young and she had to explain my own childish decisions to me. “You crave adventure and excitement. You yearn to be challenged. It’s a trait you haven’t been able to escape since even before your blood manifested. To kill him would be to cut the thread of fate on his potential.”

My fingers plucked at the air again, futilely searching for a string that didn’t exist, expecting and hoping that I could manifest it through sheer force of will alone.

“You know what your problem is, Seris?” Melzri asked, her back fully turned to us now, almost as if she’d forgotten we were there. “You think you know *everything*, all the time. Of all the Scythes, you’re actually the most like *him*.”

Seris nodded in acceptance. “Perhaps this is why I can see what you have not yet accepted: In a future where Agrona has dominated both this world and Epheotus, what role will Scythe Melzri Vritra play? What, in that future, would there be to excite you—if Agrona had a place for you at all?”

This time, Melzri was silent.

“But I can free you from Agrona’s hold over you and show you a different vision of the future. One in which you help me to kill a *god*, and in doing so, see a new age of the world born.”

“You—” Melzri cut herself off with a humorless bark of desperate laughter. “You claim to know me so well, and yet you expect me to turn my back on everything I’ve fought for my entire life? To abandon my *purpose*? I take back what I said, Seris. You are a fool.”

My fingers snagged something, and a string of glistening silver mana manifested beneath them. The bow’s body bent into shape, taking form. I imbued mana into it, forming an arrow, and pulled back.

The string wouldn’t budge.

“You strive for a purpose that is and has always been an illusion. Has this war not already proved it? At every step, some new power has been revealed that has made the battles before insignificant. We were made redundant by the Wraiths, who will in turn fall to the asura. If this continues to its natural conclusion, in the end, all that will remain is Agrona himself. And you will have spent your entire life fighting to ensure his future at the cost of your own.”

I couldn’t help the surprise I felt as Melzri appeared to actually listen to Seris, but I did not give up on my effort to draw the bowstring. No matter how I pulled, though, Silverlight refused to bend further.

“You can’t resist him,” Melzri said after a moment. “Even if you’re right, and our entire lives are made pointless by the war’s outcome, it doesn’t change anything. The result is the same regardless of which side you fight for.”

“The proof that it is possible to resist Agrona stands right there,” Seris said, indicating Caera. “Tell her how you’re still alive, Caera.”

“It was Eleanor and her mother, really,” Caera said, then continued to haltingly explain some of what had happened.

Seris smiled victoriously, shedding some of her fatigue. “See? A regular teenage girl with only a single spellform broke the power of Agrona himself. These people here, Alacryan and Dicathian alike, have risked *everything* to stand against him and protect each other as best they can, even against the most terrible odds. Do not tell them the result of this war doesn’t matter, that their *effort* doesn’t matter.”

It grew so quiet that I could hear the distant shouted orders and mechanical whirring of the mana beast suits’ movement.

Melzri stared at Seris for a long time before her gaze swept across the rest of us, settling on me. I couldn’t read the look we shared, but after a tense moment, she scoffed and flew up into the air, speeding over Seris’s head and vanishing into the distance. Her mana signature receded until no sign of her was left.

Seris turned to watch her go, her expression blank. After a few seconds, she looked back at all of us, and it was like the breaking of a spell.

Mom wrapped me in a crushing embrace, all the tension of the last few minutes seeping from her, but she didn’t stay. After gently touching her forehead to mine, she hurried away, first to Valen, then to Enola, healing enough of their wounds to bring them back to consciousness.

Silverlight’s string vanished, and the body of the bow straightened again. Seris scrutinized it with a hint of sadness, then her focus moved to Caera. “I’m…glad that you discovered how to defeat the curse on your own. I had hoped you would.”

“Well, yes. Thank you,” Caera said, her brows furrowing as she gave Seris a slight bow.

Seris’s observant eyes again flicked to me, then she moved on to regard the four Alacryan students. Enola struggled to her feet to stand stiffly before Seris, but Valen stayed sitting in the rubble, his eyes slightly unfocused. Seth and Mayla stood slightly apart from the others, holding hands so tightly that their knuckles were white.

“These others, though.” Seris approached them, suddenly businesslike. “You have done well to keep your thoughts in check, but I fear it is only a matter of time. For now…”

Black mist spilled out of her and pushed through them. Faint against the flood of her mana, I sensed theirs being pushed out of their bodies, almost in the inverse of what I could do with my spellform. As one, they each sagged, forced to the ground by the sudden backlash of their cores emptying.

“This will keep you safe until we discover a more permanent solution,” Seris explained. “Do not actively attempt to refill your cores. Your body will do so unconsciously, but if you expel your mana before it can build up, you will remain safe.”

To Bairon, she said, “You fought well today, Lance Wykes. I only regret it took me so long to convince you of the truth. Regardless, your Commander Eralith is above, arranging…accommodations…for all the Alacryans in the city. I believe he could use your assistance.” When Bairon hesitated, she added, “Retainer Bivrae is dead, and Melzri is no longer a threat to you. The fight may continue in other parts of your continent, but Vildorial is, for the moment, safe.”

“That remains to be seen,” he said, eyeing her distrustfully. Finally, though, he gave me a subtle nod, which caused a warm flare of pride in my chest, and flew off.

Finally, Seris approached me, causing Boo to shuffle closer, pressing his furry side against me so I could feel the expansion of his breath and the quick rhythm of his pulse. Mom, who was now helping to heal some of the dwarves that had survived the explosion of the front wall, paused what she was doing to watch.

“There is much of your brother in you, Eleanor.” Her eyes seemed to draw me deeper and deeper in, like bottomless dark pools. “It is good, that you are strong. This world may rely on Arthur’s strength, but he in turn relies on you and your mother.” Her lips curved up as her brows furrowed, and she gave me a wry look. “You are like the two anchors that keep his power

bound. Without you, he would be untethered, and who knows then what might become of the rest of us."

My mouth hung open, but I could not for the life of me think of a response to her unexpected words.

But Seris's attention was already turning elsewhere. "Caera, with me. There is much to do, and I have need of you."

Caera swallowed visibly. "My blood…and Arian. He was wounded badly. I was seeking a healer—"

"Come, take me to him," Seris said with a sharp gesture. Then she was walked swiftly away, her battlerobes billowing behind her.

Caera, like Bairon, hesitated, but there seemed to be little choice other than do as the commanding Scythe ordered, and so she followed. I considered following as well; with the danger so suddenly disbursing, I couldn't quite convince myself that the battle was really over, and I wanted to stay busy and remain helpful. When I looked at Mom healing the worst of the wounded dwarves, though, a compulsion to stay kept me where I was.

Hornfels, who was in charge of the Earthborn forces, arranged to have Seth, Mayla, Valen, and Enola taken up to where the rest of the Alacryans were being gathered into groups under the watchful gaze of an army of the mana beast machines. Valen and Enola, at least, had families up there, and were eager to find out what had happened to them, or at least as eager as they could be given their current state.

Before they left, though, Mayla approached me, each step sending a flicker of pain across her face, and wrapped her arms around me. "Thank you," she whispered.

"I'll come find you soon," I said, growing emotional and then embarrassed. "Get some rest."

As we watched them pick their way over the rubble behind a detachment of Earthborn soldiers, they passed Claire, who was standing over the prone mana beast machine, which now looked like little more than a tattered griffon corpse. She activated a handful of heavy bangles that ran up both

arms and a sort of wide belt around her waist, and the machine began vanishing one part at a time.

“Dimension artifacts?” I asked, walking up to her as she finished.

She regarded me thoughtfully before saying, “Yes, though not simply that. They order the components in a specific way, allowing activation of the dimension artifacts to store and then automatically rebuild the exoform. The artifacts were specially designed for use by a non-mage. I can’t say I entirely understand the principles, but it works. As long as you activate everything in the appropriate sequence, that is.”

I stared at the machine, my mind spinning futilely as I tried to understand it. After a few seconds, I echoed, “Exoform?”

She tapped one of the bangles. “The suits. Anyway, I had to overclock mine and something burned out, so it won’t be of any use to anyone until it gets repaired. I should check in with the rest of the Beast Corps, then report back to Gideon.”

“Thank you,” I blurted out a little awkwardly as she started walking away.

She didn’t stop or even turn around, only raised one bangle-laden arm above her head in farewell as she said, “Glad to be able to help.”

I watched her leave, feeling a sense of wonder at everything that had just happened, but my mood immediately soured again when she had to walk around the corpses of Bolgermud and the other guards who had been stationed along the outer wall.

Their deaths were so senseless, I thought, unable to clear my head of the image of their sudden, unstoppable demise.

I turned back to the Earthborn Institute, but the motion conjured stars behind my eyes, and I suddenly felt dizzy. I took a step, missed my footing, and went painfully down on one knee. Slowly, like a tree just starting to fall, I tipped over onto my side and lay on the broken courtyard tiles.

So much had happened so quickly, and I’d pushed myself so hard, that I could feel my mind and body both succumbing to the strain. It was almost like I was watching it happen from above, seeing myself lying there, each

breath coming in a labored gasp, my eyes vacant…but I didn't panic. I didn't really feel or think anything at all, just let myself go blank.

Then someone was forcing something down my throat, and I sat up, choking as a jolt of mana sparked inside of me. A dwarven medic kneeled over me, an empty elixir container in his fist as he spoke soft, consoling words. Boo was next to him, one eye on me, the other distrustfully on the medic.

"I'm fine," I insisted, blinking away the moment of emptiness and refocusing on what was happening around me. "Please help the others."

Many more people had appeared, coming up from within the Earthborn Institute. Mom was healing the last few injured dwarves, and she didn't seem to have noticed my collapse yet, which I was thankful for. Others—doctors, herbalists, and non-emitter healers—were now bustling around dealing with the wounds that weren't as life threatening.

I stood despite the medic's protests, shaking away the last of the cobwebs. Although I was tired and sore, and my core ached from using so much mana—even more than would usually be possible for me through use of the stored mana orbs—the elixir had reinvigorated me.

I gestured for Boo's help, and we began assisting the Earthborns as best we could. The dwarves were efficient, and the Earthborn Institute was of course full of some of the best minds in the city, so although Bolgermud's group was a total loss, surprisingly few of Hornfels' soldiers died during the attack, and the earth-attribute mages rebuilt the wall within the hour.

"I need to rest and gather mana, then I'll head out into the city to see what else I can do to help," Mom said tiredly after we'd been dismissed with many thanks by Carnelian Earthborn himself, lord of the Earthborn clan.

I bit my lip, unsure whether to voice the thought that had been growing in my mind as we'd helped with the clean-up effort. The words built and built, though, until they burst out in a rush. "Mom I'm really worried about Arthur and I think we should—" I cut myself off almost as suddenly as I'd started, looking around nervously.

Mom eyed me with concern. "Let's speak at home."

I nodded, relieved that she understood, and we wound our way down into the tunnels of the residential area. After Mom let us in and Boo threw himself down in front of the extinguished fireplace, I continued. “I think we should check on Arthur. With the stone thing…the creeper’s stone.”

Mom’s brows flared dramatically, and she glanced around as if searching for anyone who might overhear us even there. “Ellie, your brother went to great lengths to hide himself even from *us*.” As she said this, she couldn’t help but let a hint of regret-laced bitterness seep out. I knew exactly how she felt. “We would be betraying his trust to search him out, and we don’t know if that would even work, anyway…”

From her tone, I realized immediately that Mom wasn’t trying to convince me; she was trying to convince herself. I had been about to sit down, but I stopped halfway, straightened, and began pacing the small space. “Mom, there was just no way Art could have foreseen everything that is being thrown at us now. The dragons disappearing? Turning Seris and all the other Alacryans back against us? Wherever he is, he didn’t give anyone else—*us*—the chance to guard or protect him. I just want to make sure he’s okay.”

Mom bit the inside of her cheek, her emotional struggle visible on her face.

On the one hand, she was right: Arthur clearly didn’t want us, or anyone else, to find him. But on the other hand, he wasn’t perfect, and he could make mistakes too. Since he’d gotten his new godrune, I’d seen him pulled farther and farther away from everyone around him, even me and Mom. When he used it, it was like he became a slave to logical calculation. I couldn’t help the feeling that, maybe, he needed protection from himself as much as Agrona.

When Mom let out the breath she’d been holding in a rush, I knew she’d given in, as much to her own impulses as mine.

“Come on,” she said, speaking quietly. She hurried from the room and down the short hall that led to her bedroom.

My pulse quickened as sparks shot through my nerves. I double-checked that we’d locked the door when we’d come inside, then gestured for Boo to remain in the living room before following Mom.

By the time I reached her room, she'd already dug the dull, many-faceted stone out of its hiding place. She was sitting on the foot of her bed, cupping the relic in both hands. She didn't look at me as I sat down beside her. I didn't offer her any pressure or comfort. I didn't say anything at all. As an emitter, only her healing magic would conjure the spark of aether needed to activate the relic. But I could tell she wanted to check on Arthur just as much as I did, and so I didn't press her.

After a minute or more of tense silence, she took a deep breath and channeled her mana. It moved across the stone's surface without any obvious interaction; the mana simply passed it by, with none being imbued into the relic. Regardless, the stone activated with an intangible sensation that couldn't be simplified down to just something I was seeing or hearing, or even feeling with my core. It was more like the magic of it brushed up against every particle of my being.

Mom's eyes went glassy, and I could tell she was somewhere else. "Show me," I said, more pleading than I'd meant to sound.

She released the relic with her right hand and clasped mine. I felt her magic as something weird and ephemeral and distinctly *other* as it pulled me. My instinct was to resist, but I forced myself to relax. In my mind's eye, I saw myself being pulled away from the room, rushing after a mote of power that I knew was Mom. We flew up through the cavern ceiling and then the desert above, and rushed across Darv in a blink.

My already rapidly beating heart only hammered faster and harder as we traced the path to our destination. I didn't fully understand as we were drawn down into darkness, then through…something, a kind of distortion, before ending in a small, roughly constructed chamber containing a pool of glowing liquid and little else. Sitting cross-legged in the pool, Arthur and Sylvie meditated side by side with the keystone hovering in front of them.

Neither moved, giving no indication of what they were experiencing. I knew their minds must be inside the keystone. *Trapped, at least until it is solved*, I thought with a sense of foreboding. But they were unharmed; no one had found them. I let out a relieved breath and distantly felt Mom squeeze my hand. I wasn't sure how long we stayed, but it wasn't long.

When Mom began withdrawing from the relic, I was pulled along in her wake.

My eyes blinked open.

Windsom stood in the doorway, his inhuman eyes fixed on the stone.

Mom gave a yelp of surprise and tried to hide the relic behind her back.

“Forgive me,” the asura said, offering a very slight bow. “For both startling you and for my tardiness. Events conspired to keep me from immediately fulfilling Arthur’s request, but I am here to take you to Epheotus as promised.”

Mom and I exchanged glances. “Of course,” Mom said, her voice a little higher than usual. “We’re all packed. Just let me—”

“Bring the djinn relic,” Windsom said, now commanding. Mom froze. “Aldir told me of his experience of being watched while cleansing Elenoir. I suspect this is how it was done, correct? It may prove useful, especially if you are able to see Arthur with it.”

I felt my breath catch. *How does he know?*

Mom hesitated. “I’m afraid I’m not comfortable with—”

“We are allies,” Windsom interrupted, his tone hardening. He took a step forward and held out his hand. “I shall hold onto it for you. Then you can gather your belongings and we will go. The path to Epheotus is difficult to navigate at this time, but still manageable for me, if few others. We need to get through before anything else changes.”

Mom still didn’t hand the relic over, and Windsom’s expression darkened ever so slightly.

I held out my own hand to her. Her chestnut eyes narrowed as she looked down at it, her expression tightly guarded. After a short pause, she set the relic in my palm.

Windsom gave his hand an impatient shake.

I felt for the reservoir of magic inside the relic. I couldn’t sense aether, but I felt the way it moved against the mana. Not daring to gather my mana before acting, I let out a surge of pure mana into the heart of the relic, as sudden and forceful as I could manage.

It cracked, splintering through the many facets.

Slowly, I dragged my gaze away from the broken chunk of rock to Windsom, whose only reaction was a tightening of his jaw.

“Unwise, young Eleanor. Lord Indrath will not appreciate this outward sign of your distrust, not when he is risking so much to keep you safe.” Windsom shook his head, oozing disappointment. “Nevertheless, my role here is clear. Come. Epheotus awaits.”

I stood, cleared my throat, and tossed the stone under the bed. Windsom watched it roll but made no move to pick it up, instead turning on his heel and marching promptly away.

My hands shook as Mom laced her fingers through mine. I could only hope I’d done the right thing. Mom squeezed my hand again supportively and nodded.

44

FALLING INTO PLACE

CECILIA

Everything was falling into place.

With shield generators keeping the dragons at bay, the Instillers were able to work freely and establish a ring of disrupting artifacts that worked to distort and interrupt the rift between Epheotus and Dicathen. While the shield generators protected us from the dragons in Dicathen, these disruption artifacts prevented Indrath from sending support from Epheotus, effectively cutting the two worlds off from one another.

The dense ambient mana of the rift itself powered both arrays. If Indrath were somehow able to stop the flow of mana, we had enough power in batteries to implement the next stage of the plan. *And if that fails, the Wraiths themselves become the source of mana.*

Instinctively, I waited for the judgmental evaluation of my thoughts from Tessia, who hovered near the surface of my consciousness.

'You've already considered your justifications for why such a cruel act is necessary,' Tessia said in answer to the spotlight of my attention. *'All I'll say is that you've come a long way, Cecilia, if you're feeling guilt for your cruelty to these soldiers, since before now, you've only ever looked at them as tools.'*

I bristled but knew there was no point in arguing against the feeling of guilt worming its way through my guts. Not when the person I was arguing with was already in my head. *It may be unpleasant, but that doesn't make it any less necessary. Besides, it's Agrona's plan, and they're his soldiers to do with as he wills.*

I sighed even as the words formed in my head, knowing how it sounded. *Regardless, I don't need your affirmation.*

'And yet recently, you've been poking around inside my mind to see what I think more often.'

Your insight into these events is valuable, I admitted while forcefully pushing down the more honest, but also more embarrassing, reason for my behavior.

'I'm glad you recognize this fact.' Tessia's voice, projected into my head, was even and without sarcasm.

Shaking off the brief but frustrating conversation, I returned my attention to my immediate surroundings.

The dragons continued their bombardment of the outer shield for another hour but stopped with the arrival of their leader. I recognized Charon of the Indrath clan by description: a big, bone-white, battle-scarred lizard with purple eyes and tattered wings. He spent some time conferring with the other dragons present, of which there were now many.

It's almost like they've brought every dragon in Dicathen, I mused.

Eventually, Charon approached the barrier, flying in his dragon form. His wings beat slowly, and his voice issued from him as a bone-deep rumble. "The Legacy, chief hope of a mad basilisk, who has herself been convinced she is a god."

I regarded him coolly but didn't rise to his bait.

"Straight to the point then," he rumbled. "What does Agrona want? He has captured the rift to Epheotus, but he cannot use it, nor can you hope to keep it, which means this is a bargaining tactic. Tell me your master's offer, and I will confer with Lord Indrath."

I raised one brow. “Don’t lie to me, dragon. Travel between worlds requires this rift to be accessible, even with your teleportation artifacts. You are cut off. The High Sovereign has no message for you, no request. You are irrelevant in this and all things.” From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the Instillers on the ground reviewing a message, his eyes darting to me every couple of lines. “Feel free to exhaust yourselves against the shields, if you must. Or don’t. The noise is as irritating as your efforts are futile.”

Turning my back on Charon Indrath, I flew toward the ground, feeling good about the brief exchange. It gained me nothing to have won the verbal spar, but I was already beginning to chafe at my role as stationary guardian of the impenetrable shield, and releasing some of that frustration as barbed words made me feel a little better.

“What is it?” I asked as my feet touched the ground.

The Instiller, who had watched me approach from the corner of his eye, swallowed visibly. “A dispatch from Scythe Nico.” He held out the magical scroll, which displayed the words written on a matched scroll in Nico’s possession.

I read through it once rapidly, then forced myself to go over it again, slower. “An emanation…powerful mana, sustained somehow, wrapped around a pocket of amethyst magic that can only be aether.” I felt myself frowning, struggling to comprehend everything that Nico had attempted to explain in the short message.

Grey hadn’t been at the Wall. As expected, he had carefully hidden his real location, even from his own people. The emanation of aether was interesting, though. *The mana signature I sensed before the battle…*

It was camouflage. A false signal that mimicked the presence of his bond and the distortion caused by aether could only be intended to disguise his real location, of course. And I was the only person on Dicathen that might be able to sense it. *Unless he hides from his own dragon allies as well…*

The dispatch then went on to detail the efforts in Vildorial and the Dicathians’ new weapon that had been revealed. *A fusion of organic mana beast parts along with magical and mechanical components?* I couldn’t

picture what Nico described, but I felt certain that even Agrona hadn't accounted for such a thing.

The ex-Scythe, Seris, had discovered a way to end the fighting in Vildorial and keep her people safe from the curse Agrona had hidden in their blood and their runes, but Nico expressed a strong sense of confidence that Arthur had not hidden himself in the city. Additionally, the ulterior objective—to capture the sister or mother—had failed, and Scythe Melzri had gone missing.

As I read through it all for a second time, my focus returned to the part about the aetheric emanation at the Wall.

Biting the inside of my lip, I wracked my brain for what else it could mean, but I could think of no other way to read it than my first impulse: Grey was calling me out directly. This conjuration was meant to blind me to his real location, and he intended me to know and understand that fact as well.

I found myself wishing Nico were here instead of just his note. I considered sending him a reply and waiting for a response, but I didn't want to give him the impression that I couldn't think for myself.

Besides, I already knew exactly what my mission parameters were. The real question was whether or not I would continue to blindly follow them. *After all, the rift is sealed. I am wasted here.*

There was little room to get away from anyone within the shielded area. The Wraiths flew in a perimeter, staring out at the dragons, just as pent up as I was, while the dozens of Instillers ensured the equipment continued to function perfectly. But I moved to a secluded corner and sank to the ground between two of the shield generators. Closing my eyes, I let my focus expand out into my surroundings.

The balanced flow of mana in and out of the rift no longer existed, leaving the atmosphere around the shield thick with it, though it was dimmed by the blinding presence of so many asuran mana signatures. But like before, I continued expanding my reach farther and farther, until my senses reached the Wall. There, I again felt the hint of his bond's mana, as well as that telltale distortion that gave away a powerful source of aether.

But I didn’t stop there. Instead, I continued pushing, reaching, sensing even beyond the Grand Mountains and across the Elenoir Wasteland to the north.

As if I were Zeus looking down from the top of Mount Olympus, I saw the tide of mana as it moved in waves across the entire continent spread out before me. Breathless at its beauty, I eased my mind into that ocean, letting my focus be pushed and pulled not by my purpose but by the mana itself. I thought I already understood mana, better than anyone else in this world, but I’d never experienced it like this. I had no words to describe the wonder of the phenomena.

‘Do you still see this world as…fake?’ Tessia thought, her voice like a stone in the calm ocean. *‘Some kind of limbo that will cease to exist once you’ve returned to your old world?’*

What?

‘This gift you have…you may be the only one in all the world who can see this.’ She was quiet, musing, then continued. *‘I look down on this and feel my heart break, knowing the turmoil and suffering happening beneath these vistas. It just made me wonder if the sight affected you…but what kind of impact can this have on someone who doesn’t believe in the reality around them, and more importantly of their effect on that reality?’*

I didn’t answer, because the truth was I had no answer. I had used the thought of this life as a kind of temporary purgatory to soothe my own guilt at what I’d been asked to do, but I was not a child who had convinced herself that this world wasn’t *real*.

The thought brought me out of my reverie and firmly back to my purpose. I was no longer floating on the tide of the ever-moving surface of that ocean of mana, but instead I was fighting against it, pressing outward, expanding to cover more and more of the continent with my senses. The feeling of peace faded, and I was once again aware of the dragons massing around the shield, my tense soldiers and scientists filling the small space, and the dispatch from Nico in my hands.

As my untethered mind reached across Sapin, Darv, and Elenoir, I felt those places where the mana was distorted by aether brush against the surface of

my senses. In each place, there was a strong presence of aether mingled with the mana signature of Gray's dragon bond. Based on what Nico had said, each one was likely a conjuration, a shell of mana housing a core of densely packed aether.

The closest was the Wall, and after that an isolated place deep in the Elenoir Wastes. This, by comparison, was a tiny blip barely sensible against the gray emptiness due to the lack of atmospheric mana. The outskirts of the wasteland were like storms where new mana rushed into the void, but the interior of Elenoir was still nearly empty of it.

The third signal to appear was in central Darv, where I thought the Dicathian rebels' refuge must have been, which was discovered after Arthur's escape from the Victoriad. It was stronger and brighter than the Wall. Not by a significant margin, but the difference was clear.

Others became visible as well, near the city of Etistin and on an island off the southeastern coast of the Beast Glades, and then more still as my consciousness expanded to contain the entire continent.

But most of these matched the Wall in intensity, and I quickly wrote them off as decoys. We already had troops moving in those areas, which aligned perfectly with where we'd seen increased military activity, and they would verify whether or not Grey was really in each location without help from me.

The signatures in the Wastes and in Darv, though, were different. One nearly hidden, the other burning brighter and stronger than all the others. Neither had been a focal point of Dicathian troop buildup or fortification, like the Wall had been. Both were far enough from civilization to avoid collateral damage if the locations were attacked.

And both, I knew from Tessia's shared memories, were important to him.

The emanation I could sense from Elenoir was very close to where the capital city of Zestier used to be. He had lived there with Tessia for much of his childhood. And the buried village beneath Darv was where he went when the Dicathians lost the war, where he was reunited with his mother and sister after Agrona very nearly captured them.

Either Grey is trying to hide where he thought I wouldn't be able to sense him—in Elenoir, where there is little mana to give him away—or he failed to perfectly replicate his own aetheric signature, which causes a stronger disruption in the mana than these false beacons he has created. Either way, he has made a mistake. But which direction does that mistake lean?'

I struggled to bring to mind everything I knew about Grey from our world and combine it with what I'd learned of him in his life as Arthur Leywin.

The ancient mages' village makes sense, if Arthur was confident in his ability to disguise his real position, my thoughts continued. *To provide so many false positives only to hide where his real signature couldn't be sensed at all within Elenoir would truly be the act of a coward.*

'Arthur isn't a coward,' Tessia thought matter-of-factly.

And yet, either way, he hides while his allies fight and die to conceal his location, I answered.

Tessia soberly considered my words and didn't respond right away.

I agree with you, I thought to Tessia, making up my mind. *He isn't a coward. But he* is *overconfident in his own abilities.*

The moment I decided on a course of action, I was presented with another problem.

Standing, I left the meager cover of the shielding artifacts and inspected the smooth shield that wrapped around our location, extending high into the air to contain the rift. Of course, I was kept within the shield just as effectively as the horde of dragons were kept out. I *could* penetrate the barrier, of course, but doing so would expose me to Charon's army, and would even momentarily open up the equipment inside to their attacks. That wasn't acceptable. I ignored the fact that Agrona would definitely find my abandoning my post to be equally unacceptable; if I brought him Grey, however, I knew that he would forgive me.

I flagged down Lorcan, the Wraith assigned to support me and deliver my orders down to all the others. Scarred and pale with jagged, unnaturally shaped horns, Lorcan had an unpleasant look to him, but he was a real soldier. He lacked the self-importance of so many of the other Wraiths and

pursued Agrona's goals feverishly and without question. "Legacy?" he asked, his ruby eyes empty of anything except expectation.

"The situation has changed, and I am needed out in the field," I explained perfunctorily. "I'm leaving you in command of the rift. Keep the Instillers on task and the shielding arrays functional, and I have no doubt everything will continue to unfold as predicted."

If Lorcan was surprised, he gave no indication. "Of course, Legacy. At the High Sovereign's will."

I nodded in dismissal, and he returned to the air to go notify the leaders of each Wraith battle group.

Returning to the relative solitude between two of the shield artifacts, I sat down cross-legged and waited. It had been maybe thirty minutes since Charon had arrived and the occasional attacks against the shield ceased. I didn't think they would wait much longer before attempting an assault with their leader present.

While I waited, I extended my senses through the ground, feeling for where the shield emanated and closed off beneath us, as well as where the soil was softest. If I were to leave, I needed to do so unnoticed if I planned to search for Grey without being hounded by the dragons.

Five more minutes passed in relative silence, then all at once, the atmosphere outside of the shield transformed into a storm of mana, the air going white as if we were caught in the heart of a lightning bolt. The hair on my arms lifted at the charge in the air, and my skin was prickled with gooseflesh. The ground and sky alike split open as dozens of asuran spells crashed against the shield.

I took hold of the earth-attribute mana, and the soil flowed like water, allowing me to sink down into it. At the same time, I clenched tightly onto my own mana, preventing even the tiniest leak that might be sensible as a moving mana signature. To more completely camouflage myself, I smoothed over any movement in the atmospheric mana that might provide some hint of my whereabouts to the sensitive dragons.

The noise of the battle changed from the sharp crack of thunder to the deep rumble of an avalanche. Earth-attribute mana projected me forward through the ground itself, which folded out of the way before filling back in behind me as if I were swimming through the hard-packed dirt.

The tangible force that made up the barrier loomed in front of me. Reaching into it, I took hold of a thread of that mana and pulled. Like the seam in stitched fabric, it came undone, and I passed through. I waited on the other side for a few moments until the barrier healed itself, powered by the constant pressure of the array of artifacts above, then continued.

Even with my nearly perfect control of mana, it was still more difficult and slower to part the earth and the network of roots woven through it than to fly through air. But since the dragons could range so far so quickly, and more were still trickling in from across the continent, I wanted to ensure I wouldn't be detected, and so I flowed along deep under the ground for a long time. Dungeons and caves dotted the landscape of the Beast Glades, but I maneuvered around them rather than slow my progress further by going through.

'If Arthur is really unable to defend himself, then he has no choice but to hide. And his friends—all the people who love him—defend him willingly,' Tessia said out of the blue.

It took me a moment to connect her thoughts to our previous conversation. *And do you? Really love him, I mean.* I didn't think I needed to ask, since our minds were connected, but Tessia's emotions around Grey were complex and difficult to parse even when she wasn't trying to disconnect me from them.

'I have since I was just a little girl,' she said after a very long pause. *'He was my first love, I think.'*

But now you know what he is. Who *he is. That he lied to you the entire time you've known him. With all that baggage, can you still really love him?*

'I don't think Arthur ever pretended to be anyone except who he really was,' she answered slowly, forming every word with care. *'I can only imagine how hard it must have been for him—the loneliness, the guilt of having to keep such a secret.'*

He lied to you because he had to, I continued, my mental voice softening.

‘What other choice did he have?’ she asked. *‘I won’t pretend I understand what it means to build emotionally on top of all this. Is the love of a child real? Maybe not. But I know that I care for him, respect him, and want him to have a happy life after all this. If that isn’t a foundation for real love, then I’m not sure what is.’*

Her words helped me give context to my own complex emotions. *I feel pretty much the same about the lies Nico helped Agrona placed in my head. They were for a purpose, and Nico felt like he had to do that. It was for my own good, like Grey to you.*

‘That’s…not what I meant,’ Tessia said tentatively. She paused for a few seconds. *‘Arthur needed to protect himself with lies. Right or wrong, it wasn’t an action made to control me.’*

It was not difficult to read the unspoken implication of her words, which I considered in silence for some time. *You think you’re justified in forgiving Grey’s lies but I’m foolish for forgiving Nico and Agrona.*

As if anticipating what I’d say, she replied immediately. *‘I think you’re still trying to figure out who you are, Cecilia, and that you struggle to make decisions you are confident in because you constantly question the source of any thought you have. Is it you or Agrona? Or even me? I don’t want to be the voice in your ear guiding you to do things my way.’*

Again, I had no answer, and so we both fell silent, our thoughts like two murky clouds just intermingling at the edges. I let the sight of the soil unfolding in front of me pull me in and wipe away any lingering thoughts about Grey or Nico…or myself.

I lifted up from the soil only after verifying that there were no dragons for a very long way, then flew out over the Grand Mountains. The cold air felt good after the claustrophobic tunneling of my underground flight.

The mountains and then the desert beyond flew by in a blur, reminding me of the teleportation gates utilized by the Dicathians. They were relics of the ancient mages, much like the underground village I found as I lowered myself through a gaping hole in the desert floor where the cavern ceiling

had partially collapsed. Huge piles of sand had accumulated below, covering half the cavern. What I could see of the rest was completely demolished.

According to the rumors our spies had sifted through, Grey fought an actual asura here. Looking at the damage, I could believe it.

This close, I could now sense the aether-mana emanation from below even without forcefully extending my senses. Despite the winding network of tunnels that spread out from the destroyed village, the emanation was like a compass, pointing where I needed to go. Aside from a few huge rodent-like mana beasts, I saw nothing as I sped along the dark tunnels.

I was nearly at my target when dread suddenly came over me, dousing my anticipation like wind to a candle flame. My feet touched the ground, then instinctively shuffled backward as I searched the square hallway for the source of my dread. It was like a miasma hanging in the air, an intangible thing with very real claws that wanted to rake at my eyes and lungs and heart, but there was no spell, no mana that I could—

An aetheric effect, I realized. *A dread that can't be passed through or cast aside. The perfect layer of protection.*

Though I'd continued to waffle back and forth, second-guessing my decision to come to Darv instead of Elenoir, I knew then that I'd chosen correctly.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed outward with mana, both my own purified mana that circulated through my coreless body and the atmospheric mana that lingered in the tunnels deep below the ground. Cracks ran up the walls and spiderwebbed across the floor, and visible distortions of light and heat flickered in the air. Ice condensed over the walls, then shattered and ran as water to pool across the floor before hissing to steam and circulating back into the air, where it was again forced outward from the pressure I exuded.

The dread lessened, then receded, still present but distant and lacking power. I couldn't control the aether, nor could I break the spell and end its effect, but by moving a strong enough force of mana, I had disrupted it momentarily. Wasting no time, I sped forward, quickly leaving the zone of dread behind.

When I turned the next corner, I came to an abrupt stop.

A wall of living stone bisected the tunnel, moving constantly from left to right across the path. Despite the tons and tons of rapidly shifting stone, it hardly made a noise.

“What other tricks do you have up your sleeve, Grey?” I asked, my voice ringing loudly against the muffled rushing of the spell.

As I watched it move, I noticed the small details. It wasn’t a solid wall of stone, but many smaller plates that fit together like puzzle pieces, all flowing within a groove cut perfectly to fit the machination. It radiated a powerful and alien flavor of mana, which suggested an origin that was neither Dicathian nor Alacryan.

I pushed against the mana with my own, and it shoved back hard enough that I stumbled a step and was forced to catch my balance. A scowl fell across my face. Holding up one hand to help me focus, I grabbed hold of the rapidly shifting stone with earth-attribute mana.

The interlocking plates of stone shivered as the power controlling them fought back against mine. Without releasing the pressure I was exerting, I reached for that power and tried to draw on it. It held, heavy and inexorable, as immovable as the roots of the world. I pulled harder, straining against the weight of that power until the plates forming the moving wall splintered, shattering and grinding to a halt, filling the hallway with broken chunks of rock. The walls trembled, and a terrible rumbling noise threatened to shake the very foundations of Dicathen to pieces.

Then, as suddenly as it had happened, the shaking and grinding stopped.

I bent down to inspect a chunk of the stone. It had a slight luster to it, dimmer than obsidian and without the telltale smooth striations where the breaks happened. Instead, there were layers upon layers of compacted rock pressed together, almost like the rings of a tree.

It was difficult to put my finger on, but there was almost a kind of life to the stone. When I ran a finger along the rough surface of the break, gooseflesh raised across my skin, and I pulled away.

The hallway continued beyond the wall of moving stone into darkness. Standing straight, I stared at the gap. “I know you’re here, asura. I’m sure you can hear me. I suppose threats or promises will be met with equal silence, so I won’t insult you by trying to sway you from your course. But in ten minutes, when you are taking your last ragged breaths, remember this moment, and how you could have chosen differently.”

A dull chuckle echoed from the darkness, and a man stepped out of the shadows and into the range of my mana-augmented eyesight. His back had a slight hunch to it, enhancing the frail look of his physique. Dark, tired eyes stared at me from beneath a curtain of greasy black hair. “Bravado. That’s what happens when you give a child endless power. You spend far too much of your energy convincing yourself you really are as great as people keep telling you, despite the fact that you feel like an imposter in your own skin.” He cocked his head slightly, letting the greasy mop of hair hang down. “Well, except that you’re an imposter in someone else's skin, but never mind that.”

My jaw clenched painfully, and I lashed out with a crack of thunder and spear of lightning. The attack struck the asura in the chest, and he exploded, his flesh and bones spraying across the smooth floor with a clatter. Except, it wasn’t flesh and bones, but only more of the striated stone.

“I didn’t expect an asura to play children’s games,” I said, trying and mostly succeeding to keep my voice level. “If I’m not as powerful as they say, why run and hide?”

No words came back to me but my own voice resounding softly in the cramped space.

Cautiously, I stepped through the gap into the hallway beyond. The tunnel almost immediately split into a ‘y’ shape before turning again shortly in both directions, limiting the distance I could see. The walls were made of the same type of stone. When I ran my hand down the wall, I found it warm to the touch, but pulled away when it thrummed with a sort of pulse, much slower than my own heartbeat but no less real.

Grey’s aetheric signature resonated from my left, not far.

Tessia’s silent tension sat in the back of my skull like an impending migraine.

I went to the left, and the low, narrow tunnel turned left again after twenty feet or so, only to turn right shortly after that. When I reached the next split, I understood. *A maze.*…

Closing my eyes, I homed in on the distortion in the mana I knew was Grey. When I pulled at the earth-attribute mana infused into the stone wall in that direction, the entire labyrinth quaked. I slammed my will against it, and the wall exploded.

The labyrinth became a churning thresher of stone plates moving in every direction around me. Ducking beneath a guillotine-sharp chunk, I wrapped myself in mana and watched breathlessly.

It seemed to be wild chaos, but it wasn’t. No, the roiling stone, in the form of tons upon tons of interlocking plates, was as controlled as the workings of a clock, fitting together just so and sliding past each other with perfect integrity. It was truly a work of art, a use of mana so inexplicably beautiful that I could never hope to recreate it.

Like a stone in the clockwork, I interrupted the mechanism, and a few plates cracked against my mana barrier, but others shifted seamlessly to replace them.

In moments, the entire labyrinth had reformed around me, leaving me standing at a dead end, the broken wall replaced by an entirely new one.

Closing my eyes, I felt around me, tracing the lines of mana. The maze was thick with atmospheric earth-attribute mana, like a heavy dust that clung to everything and choked the air. Arthur’s signature radiated out from the center of the maze, but the brightness of the mana was such that I couldn’t cleanly follow the maze only with my senses.

I pulled back and slammed into the walls again. Again, they exploded, the plates forming them spinning through the air, reconnecting, and reforming new walls before sliding smoothly back into place.

I tried to see through the hole before it closed, but the chaos blinded me until the maze had reformed.

Giving myself time to think, calm down, and absorb more mana—searching specifically for pieces of the asura's mana that I could pluck away from the greater cloud—I began to follow the maze instead of attempting to smash my way through again.

Moving cautiously as I maneuvered through the twists and turns, I tried to be patient and methodical. That, unfortunately, was not my strong suit.

"Damn this place," I cursed as I ran into yet another dead end.

Bit by bit throughout the maze, I drew in hints of this asura's mana, and my insight into its particular attributes grew. It wasn't the same as draining Dawn, the phoenix, of all her mana, but I could feel the scales tipping in my direction moment by moment.

"Your control really is remarkable," a voice said from behind me, and I spun around to find the frail-looking asura not thirty feet away. "Gaining insight into titan mana arts by drawing directly on it, forcing it away from me? That is a kind of mastery I wouldn't have thought possible."

I inspected the figure closely, looking for anything that might tell me if this was the real asura or just another golem. I hadn't noticed it before, but there was a subtle pattern to his skin, and a sharpness of his features, that replicated the texture of the stone. "Likewise, it's pretty incredible that you can make such a convincing replica of yourself."

I thrust both hands forward and a storm of hailstones, each one vibrating with a core of condensed sound-attribute deviant mana, hissed down the hall. A wall of the moving stone plates shifted into place between me and the asura, and a sound like old Earth gunfire erupted through the hallway as the hailstones and wall both exploded.

The conjured wall collapsed, revealing the asura, half his face blown away. The remaining part of his mouth smiled, and then the golem tipped backward, struck the floor, and burst apart into a thousand sharp shards.

Instantly, I turned gravity against the stones, making them tumble across the floor to me. Mana was still wicking away from their surface, like gently smoking embers. I drew on it, pulling in as much as possible.

Something clicked into place.

I squared off with the maze wall that faced toward Arthur’s signature. I took time to gather my power, letting purified mana wash out of me, collect across the surface of the stone wall, and creep into the miniscule cracks where the connecting plates intersected.

Instead of slamming my will into the magic holding the walls in place all at once, I firmly but consistently ramped up the pressure, starting with a small push and then slowly applying more and more force. Soon the walls were quaking again, the opposing forces acting on the mana compressing the individual particles like they were caught in a vice, the plates of stone warping to reveal the cracks between.

Pressing clawed fingers of mana into the cracks, I peeled them apart, ripping my way through the wall. This time, when the surge of magic began to rebuild the labyrinth with me still inside it, I grabbed hold of the spell. Many thousands of stone plates separated, shifted, and then froze in the air, hovering deconstructed all around me, like the individual motes of snow in a snowglobe.

Dust and stone swirled before me, manifesting the asura yet again. He thrust forward, and a fist of stone struck my sternum, lifting me off the ground and sending me flying backward. As my concentration broke, my hold on his spell released, and the stone plates spun and twisted into place, reforming the maze.

I smashed into a solid wall, which buckled, then went flying through it. Another wall rose to meet me, and then another, as I was driven through them like a hammered nail.

Fighting to retain my senses, I molded gravity so that it pulled toward me from every direction, forcibly stilling myself at the center of a crushing gravity well. My teeth ground together as I fought to ignore the screaming pain that raked through every part of my body. Releasing all that tension, energy, and pain as a wild shout, I shoved outward.

The maze ripped itself to pieces, a wall of gravity, wind, and pure mana-born force carrying an arsenal of stone plates away from me in a tide of bloody violence.

I sagged, resting my hands on my knees, unable to hold myself fully upright. The resistance seemed to shrink, diminished. Looking through the curtain of gunmetal gray hair, I saw a large, flat chamber that had been opened up around me. It was smaller than I might have imagined, and almost empty aside from the rubble strewn about.

The asura was on one knee not far away. Bloody slashes covered his body —the real one, I was certain. He turned his head toward the center of the chamber, where a second figure rested atop a thick cushion, sat with his legs crossed beneath him and his arms resting over his knees, eyes closed. “Arthur, wake up!” the asura wheezed breathlessly.

Adrenaline and the flush of victory pushed down my pain, and I strode toward Grey. With a flick of my hand, stone plates scythed through the air, knocking the asura to the ground. Claws of mana reached toward Arthur, accompanied by a spike of fear and disbelief from Tessia.

Arthur’s eyes snapped open, and he gave me a wry grin.

My stomach lurched as the ground beneath me gave way. Bursts of mana exploded like fireworks in front of my eyes and echoed across the chamber, slamming into my senses from all sides. Mentally reeling, I wrapped myself in a blanket of mana and tried desperately to both dim my senses and catch my fall.

An external force pushed on me from above, driving me downward.

With a furious shout, I wrested away control of gravity and locked myself in place. My eyes fluttered open; the dark chamber was mostly lost beneath a sea of white spots sparkling across my vision, but I could see, right beneath me, an oily, dimly shining opaque surface within a carved frame: a portal.

Another battery of mana collided with me from above, forcing me toward the portal, which opened beneath me like the maw of some great mana beast. Understanding, I shoved downward into the portal itself, warping the surface and pushing it away from me as I sank inch by inch toward it. My mana wrapped around the frame, and I heaved, trying to rip it apart and destroy the portal within.

But more and more mana was pressing down on me, tidal waves of mana. Inching around, I glared back over my shoulder.

Grey was flying above me. Where he had been, there was now a stone pedestal topped with a glowing ellipsoid made of silvery white mana and amethyst aether. His face, framed by waving wheat-blond hair and set with golden eyes, was sharp, his wry expression bitter and stiff.

With one hand, I clawed at the portal. With the other, I reached back and attempted to grasp him. If I could drag him down with me, into the portal…

Tessia's panicked claws sank into the back of my mind as she struggled to exert herself. *'I'm sorry, Cecilia, but I can't let you do this.'* Emerald vines wrapped around my arms and my throat.

But after what happened with Mordain, I was ready.

Within me, vines of pure mana mimicked her own, finding her spiritual essence and wrapping around it, binding it, choking and crushing it.

My focus was too divided. I couldn't fight Grey, Tessia, and the portal all at once.

I met those golden eyes and released my hold over the portal. Spinning my body in place, I wrenched the vines from Tessia's control and sent them snaking up. They wrapped around Grey's arms, legs, and neck, and, with a jerk, pulled him toward me. The vines closed crushingly around the trapped limbs, the thorns digging into his flesh, droplets of blood running from the wounds.

I had him! And even better, I had interrupted his focus on the keystone. He would never control fate—

Relief washed over me, but not my own. Distracted, I looked inward toward Tessia. She was pulling back, no longer fighting me.

Above, cracks spread out from where the vines constricted around Grey's limbs. Where the blood droplets ran, they washed away the color of his skin, revealing flat gray beneath.

My eyes widened, jumping from Grey to the ellipsoid conjuration of mana and aether sitting on the pedestal. I thought of the heavy earth mana blanketing this cavern, of the slightly imperfect golems and the asura's apparent desperation as he struck out at me when I'd controlled his spell. Layer after layer of deceit, all performed perfectly.

Grey, who projected none of the tension between mana and aether that I should have felt, winked at me with one golden eye, and when it opened again, only gray stone stared out of a gray face. One arm shattered, and instead of blood and bone, stone sparked, revealing the same tight rings of compaction I had noticed before.

As my back hit the portal and I felt it wrapping around me and pulling me in, Grey crumbled to dust. Behind where he had been, the asura sat in a floating earthen throne, one thin brow raised disdainfully as he glared down at me, a hand pressed over his blood-darkened side.

Then the world turned violet and gray, and the portal took me.

45

RECKONING

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Nico looked at me and gave a mischievous smirk. “There’s going to be a new one today. Another *girl*. Draneeve let it slip this morning.”

I only shook my head as I proceeded with my stretches to prepare.

“I hope she’s as cute as that Maylis girl.” Nico watched me eagerly, knowing that talking about this stuff always made me blush. I tried to hide it but still felt the heat creeping up my neck. Nico laughed, watching me stretch without making any effort to do so himself. “I think that one liked you.” The grin became forced. “More than she liked me, anyway.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and brushed a lock of auburn hair out of my face, mumbling, “I think you’re missing the point.”

I hated it when he tormented me like this. I had the feeling he’d always been like that, even in our past life, but my memories of Earth and being a king weren’t very clear anymore. Some stuff, like all the physical training I’d done, stuck out clearly, but my life itself seemed all fuzzy.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Nico said, rolling his eyes before casting a vacant stare across the training chamber. “We’re searching for some mythical third

Musketeer for our dynamic duo.” Nico frowned suddenly, an expression I felt myself matching.

“What’s a Musketeer?” we both asked at the same time.

Nico shrugged, chuckling, but I couldn’t release the question quite so easily. We often found ourselves drawing on some shared fact or piece of cultural memory from our lives on Earth, but they just as often made no sense to either of us. I couldn’t help but ask myself if it had always been like that since my reincarnation, but like the memories of Earth, my life before Scythe Cadell saved me from that dragon and brought me to Alacrya was also fuzzy.

I suppose they would be though, I considered. *I was only like four or five when that happened.*

My thoughts lingered on this subject, picking futilely at the fabric of those memories without gaining any new insight into them as I completed my pre-training warm-up. Only when Scythes Melzri and Viessa appeared did Nico hurry to follow my lead. The two Scythes watched us silently, Melzri appearing bored while Viessa radiated a constant undercurrent of disappointment.

When Scythe Cadell arrived shortly after, I hopped up and stood at attention. With him was a girl who appeared to be about my age. She had navy hair the color of the deep ocean water I’d seen when visiting the coast of Vechor with Cadell, but it was her eyes that really stood out. They were like two shining rubies inset in her slightly round face.

Cadell snapped his fingers, and I jolted to attention, realizing I’d been staring. Beside me, Nico kept shooting expectant glances at me, but I ignored him as best I could.

“Grey. Nico. This is Caera of Highblood Denoir.” Cadell watched us closely, his red eyes dark in comparison to the girl’s. Aside from his lips and eyes, not a muscle twitched. He stood so still he might as well have been carved of stone. “She is descended of Vritra blood, though she has not yet awakened. She will be training with you for the next few days. This opportunity is a great honor for the Denoir blood.” His tone changed as he

said this last bit, making it clear he was speaking to the girl without even looking at her.

She bowed deeply, her navy hair falling over her face. “Of course, Scythe Cadell Vritra! Thank you for this incredible opportunity. Highblood Denoir will prove its purity to the High Sovereign.”

They’re all the same, I thought, remembering every other young Vritra-blooded foster child that had been brought to train with us over the last couple of months. It was hard to see the world from their perspective. To them, the High Sovereign was this mystical, unknowable force, a god among men. And he *was* a bit intimidating—and so *weird*—but mostly, he was just Uncle Agrona.

Cadell gave me a meaningful look, forcing me to straighten even further, then turned his attention to the other Scythes. “I’ll leave the minutiae of today’s training to you.”

“As always,” Melzri said under her breath as Cadell swept from the room. I knew he had *insane* hearing and must have heard her, but Melzri was always snide, and he always ignored her. I liked Cadell, but I couldn’t imagine smarting off to him—or being anything other than completely and perfectly respectful, actually. In some ways, he was a lot scarier than even Uncle Agrona.

Viessa stepped forward and motioned the three of us into a line. Melzri took three imbued training blades from their stand and handed one to each of us. They were made of charwood, a black wood that was hard, dense, and difficult to work with, but that held magic easily.

“Nico, Grey, you will start,” Viessa said, her voice sending a shiver up my spine as always. “Show Caera the speed and intensity of sparring that we expect. Focus on form and proper delivery of your strikes. Your equipment will be set to correct sloppiness.”

I felt my muscles tense, and Nico stiffened behind me. The runes carved into the blades and handles of our training swords helped to track the speed, force, and precision of our movements. They could also be set to deliver painful shocks to either the target or the wielder, depending on the

performance of both sides. When Viessa led the training, it was often both, and the painfulness of the “correction” was always intensified.

“Caera, we expect you to be able to match these little idiots’ pace without the aid of any mana usage,” Melzri told the girl. “Pay attention. Internalize their speed and style. Remember, we’re looking to see if you can train together effectively, and that means smoothly duplicating their efforts.” She gave Nico a meaningful look. “Unless they’re slacking. Then don’t hold back, and definitely don’t worry about hurting them.”

Caera’s eyes flicked uncertainly toward Melzri for a heartbeat before her expression settled again. “Yes, Scythe Melzri Vritra!”

“Come on,” Nico grumbled, struggling to keep the pout off his face. As much as he was happy to be the teaser, he hated when Melzri picked on him, which only made her do it even more.

He moved to the center of the training area, spun, and stepped into a tail stance, the blade of his sword facing backward from me with his arms across his body. I raised my brow questioningly, and he gave a small nod. *Taking this seriously today, I guess.* But his gaze kept slipping past me to the girl, and I’d trained with Nico enough times to know this was already over.

With my own left leg forward, I let the point of my sword dip down into the fool’s stance and took a breath, letting most of my body relax. Then I waited. Nico was never very patient, but he was a lot more impatient when he felt like he needed to prove something. *Like when there’s a girl around.* We stayed like that for only a few seconds before he tensed.

He opened with a sweeping upward cut, which I avoided with a quick backstep without even bringing up my own weapon. Nico’s sword swung around from right to left, maintaining the momentum of the heavy charwood, then sliced down toward my shoulder. Instead of dodging left, which would have been the natural direction, I ducked my head and stepped right, moving beneath his blade and bringing my own up into his side with a soft *thud*.

He grunted and backed away, gritting his teeth.

There was a jolt of mana from my training sword, racking my arms and chest with shooting spikes of pain. I clenched my fists, trying not to let the pain show as I looked at the Scythes questioningly.

“If your opponent was wearing armor and had the protection of mana, he would not even have been wounded by the force of your strike,” Viessa explained in her cold manner. “Do not fail young Lady Caera by showing weakness in front of her. You know better than to think that level of force would be acceptable, boy.”

Frustrated, I nodded sharply and reset. This time, Nico was more patient, and I went on the offensive first. The heavy charwood blades cracked together loudly several times, followed by a pronounced thump and a growl of pain from Nico. We reset again.

“Better. This is the speed we expect,” Viessa said to the girl. “Any traditional forms are acceptable. There will be an opportunity for training later that encourages you to break free of established stances, but today, we wish to see if you are trained well enough to identify and counter the styles used by Nico and Grey.” Speaking to us again, she snapped, “Well? What are you waiting for? Do not waste my time.”

Nico and I sparred for twenty minutes, exchanging three times that many strikes. Of every strike that landed, three out of four were mine, and my training sword did not correct me again. Nico, on the other hand, started to twitch at each pause after the fifth time his sword shocked him.

After that, Viessa called a halt and brought the girl forward, and Melzri pulled me to the side. She forced me to stand with my back to the sparring session with my eyes closed. With her powerful mana signature so close and only barely restrained, it was difficult to focus on any other sense but that of my core. “Narrate the sparring session,” she ordered.

I homed my natural senses toward the sounds and movement of the much dimmer mana signatures of Nico and the girl. Their turnshoes scuffed across the floor. The skin of their hands creaked as they tightly gripped the leather-wrapped handles of their training swords. Nico’s breathing was heavier and faster than the girl’s.

“Caera struck first,” I began narrating, doing my best to picture their fight in my mind’s eye. A series of wood-on-wood *cracks* resounded through the chamber. “Nico is fighting defensively, not striking back. He”—there was a pulse of mana followed by a muffled groan—“is holding back.”

“Good,” Melzri said, sounding slightly bored. “Continue.”

I kept up a constant narration of the sparring session for the next twenty minutes, receiving a sharp rap against a thigh or biceps whenever I missed something or got the flow of combat wrong.

But as I listened, I felt my attitude beginning to change.

The girl had clearly trained extensively. The problem with these foster Vritra-bloods—from those I had met—was that they were simultaneously treated like weapons and like they were made of glass. Haughty and filled with self-importance and unearned social power, none of them had been focused or put in the work. Naturally talented, yes, but well trained, no.

Except for this girl. Slightly on the heavy side, she was stronger than even the boys we had trained with, but still fast. She only missed a few steps over the whole twenty minutes as she fell smoothly in and out of a dozen or more stances. As much as Nico wasn’t exactly the hardest worker in Taegrin Caelum, he was still better than any of the other kids we’d trained with by a mile, but this girl kept up, landing a strike for every one Nico gave her.

By the time they were done, I found myself reconsidering my earlier thought. *Perhaps they aren’t all the same after all.*

“Nico. To me,” Melzri snapped, marking an end to Caera and Nico’s sparring. “Grey. Go. Do not disappoint me.” She looked at my training sword meaningfully as she handed it over.

Having studied Caera carefully over the last twenty minutes, I assumed I knew what to expect when our turn to spar began. She surprised me immediately, mimicking the fool’s stance I’d adopted earlier against Nico only to feint her first strike forward, step back into the tail stance, *spin*, and deliver a leaping downward cut at my left arm. I only just brought my own blade up in time, catching her strike and driving forward so her own blade

was pushed back at her. She rotated in the air, her feet flying forward, and crashed onto her back, her head bouncing off the stone tiles.

Nico cursed and spun around to see what happened only to get a strike across the back of his knees from Melzri. I instinctively moved forward to offer Caera a hand up and make sure she was all right, but a cold glare from Viessa stopped me in my tracks.

Caera rolled over, pushed herself up, and rubbed the back of her head gingerly. Her fingers came away spotted with red.

“Do you require a healer, girl?” Viessa said, the question sounding more like a threat.

“No,” Caera said immediately, straightening. She wiped the blood off on her pants, then turned back to me, her training sword held tightly in both hands. “Nice move. I thought I’d catch you off guard with the jump, but—”

“But you sacrificed your ability to adjust your stance and absorb the pushing force from a strong defensive maneuver,” I interrupted.

She only nodded. With a command from Viessa, we began again.

Our twenty minutes passed by in what felt like moments, and I realized when it was over that I’d actually been having *fun*. Caera was experienced, but she was also very intuitive. Whether due to a balance in our talents or her own quick ability to gauge an opponent and adjust, she matched Nico and I near perfectly, much better than any of the others. I knew even before the first hour was over that she would be the one.

The thought made me inexplicably nervous. *What is she really here for, though?*

“Not bad, you little beasts,” Melzri said, eyeing us with an uncomfortably predatory gaze. “Drink. Take a few minutes to rest and talk. We have several more hours of *earth-shatteringly exciting* training ahead of us today.” She walked away, taking Viessa with her.

I filled three stone cups from the fountain running down one wall of the training chamber and handed them to the others. Nico only grunted, but

Caera took the cup with both hands and bowed slightly to show respect. “Thank you.”

“So where’d you learn all that?” Nico burst out, failing as usual to compose himself. “You’re better than you should be.”

Cup halfway to her lips, Caera bristled. She slowly lowered the cup and regarded Nico with poorly veiled irritation. “And how good should I be, exactly?”

Nico’s eyes widened, and he almost took a physical step back. “That’s not —I just meant…” He looked to me for help, but I pretended not to see as I took a deep drink, draining my cup. “I just meant that you’re really good, is all.”

“Of course I am. I’m of the Denoir blood,” she said, her chin raised. Although it was perfectly practiced, there was a hint of being forced that undercut her haughtiness. Softer, and with less attitude, she added, “I’m going to be an ascender one day. I have to train to be ready.”

Nico’s eyes lit up, and the tension dissolved as the conversation turned to the Ascenders Association, the Relictombs, and the accolades that could be found within it. I found myself smiling through the conversation, and more and more I couldn’t take my eyes off Caera of Highblood Denoir.

Time rushed by, and everything except the three of us melted away. As I lost myself to a blur of fighting, training, and tutoring, Caera’s face always stayed in focus. As she was tempered by the grueling pace of Uncle Agrona’s training over the following years, her face thinned, never entirely losing its roundness but becoming more defined, more mature. More beautiful.

Her hand was clammy as it squeezed mine. She didn’t look at me out of the corner of her eye, but I could feel her attention on me, her desire for comfort and support. It wasn’t like her to be so nervous, but then again, this wasn’t exactly a normal day.

Nico, Caera, and I were standing together quietly in the outer foyer of Agrona’s private rooms, staring silently ahead. A huge wing covered much of the wall across from me. The thick membrane connecting the framework

of bones had been torn and then repaired in a couple of places, and the white scales looked dull and faded in the dim light. I wondered if the wing had belonged to the dragon that took me from my family when I was just a boy, the one Cadell had saved me from.

I felt eyes on me and glanced at Nico. He looked away, but not before I saw the expression on his face as he took in Caera's hand holding mine.

I would have sighed, but I didn't want to break the tense silence.

There had always been a competitive rivalry between Nico and me. I progressed faster, trained harder, and received higher-level runes; it was only natural that he occasionally grew frustrated by always coming in second. I didn't blame him for it. He had been my best friend through two lives. We were bound together by fate, or so I thought. But the dynamic between us had changed when Caera arrived. She had been…well, whatever Uncle Agrona was looking for. Talented, driven, and striking a perfect balance, socially, between Nico and me. At least, until previously mentioned feelings.

There wasn't a lot of room to figure out things like relationships in the way we lived, and I didn't exactly get pointers from people like Scythes Cadell, Melzri, and Viessa, who were our primary teachers, among dozens of other powerful mages who served Agrona. And I didn't ever plan for it. We just kind of stumbled into it as the mutual attraction between us started to invade into our constant training and schooling. We spent almost every waking hour together, after all. Maybe it was inevitable.

So, though, were Nico's feelings. I knew he'd been smitten with Caera from the moment she walked through that door into the training chamber years ago. He couldn't help himself, it's just who Nico was. He also, unfortunately, couldn't help his resentment at always coming in second to me. And he'd pulled back from us almost immediately the first time he caught us holding eye contact with each other just a little too long.

The air pressure in the room changed, and I realized the doors had opened. Uncle Agrona, dressed simply in a loose-fitting tunic but with his customary ornamentation draped from the antlerish horns extending up from his head, regarded the three of us with a pleased smile. "Ah, here they

are, the three most important people in all the world. Come in, come in, we have much to discuss."

Caera squeezed my hand again then slipped her own free, following Agrona first. Nico raised his brows and shrugged, falling in beside me as we trailed after.

We proceeded through a series of lavishly decorated hallways and rooms until we reached a chamber I couldn't remember visiting before. The heady smells of rich soil and a mixture of many different kinds of plants wafted out of a half-open door that led into a kind of indoor garden. Sunlight poured in through a glass ceiling, and water trickled in small streams down the walls and into troughs inset into the ground.

Plants sprouted up from the soil haphazardly, winding into and through one another as if they each fought for their own survival. Flowers that looked too delicate to compete stabbed up through thick, thorn-covered brambles. Grasping vines hung down the walls, recoiling visibly as we entered.

Agrona chuckled and reached up to stroke one of the vines. "You are very lucky, Caera," he said. His back was to us, but I could hear the smile in his voice. "Very few in this world will ever have the opportunity to fulfill their purpose so completely as you."

Caera swallowed heavily. "What is my purpose, High Sovereign?"

Agrona paused and turned to look at her, one brow raised above the other.

"Uncle Agrona," she corrected with a small bow.

He resumed moving through the room, bending to smell a flower here or plucking a petal there. "You are the vessel, Caera," he said, as if that explained everything.

I felt myself frowning, but I knew better than to interject. *A vessel is something you put something else into…*

"Your friends have fulfilled their purpose as anchors admirably, forging for me the perfect vessel," Agrona said, which didn't exactly clarify anything. "You are going to change the world, dear one."

Caera shot me a slightly panicked look. “I’m sorry, Uncle. I don’t understand.”

Agrona turned with a flourish, his hands extended out to his side. “But of course you don’t! How could you? The Legacy is beyond your comprehension, but not for long. Soon, you will understand *perfectly*.”

My eyes twitched to Nico’s at Agrona’s mention of the Legacy. Our expressions were so identical, it was almost like looking into a mirror.

Cecilia…

Cold fury like hot coals settled into the bottom of my stomach as I finally understood. I looked away, unable to meet Caera’s eyes, unable to accept what I had done to her. I didn’t really listen as Agrona continued, and when he dismissed us, I went straight back to my own room and didn’t answer the door when Caera came knocking later. I couldn’t face her. I didn’t want to hold her hand and look into her eyes and know I had killed her.

Instead, I threw myself into our training. I lived for it—the progression, the power it provided. I’d never felt powerless in this life until I learned what Agrona had in store for Caera. I hated that feeling more than anything, and so I decided not to be powerless. One day, I would be stronger than them all.

Charwood thudded heavily against steel in rapid succession. The mana imbuing the two blades crackled and sent sparks flying around them. Nico was on the defensive, all his effort exhausted just in keeping my blade away from him, but his hands alone weren’t fast enough, and he was forced to retreat a half-step with each blow.

I varied my attacks, striking swiftly from alternating directions while continuing to press forward, waiting.

He missed his footing, and his blade twisted out of position. The charwood—shaved down to a deadly sharp edge—struck him high on the arm. The mana clinging to his exposed flesh and the outer surface of his armor sundered, carved open by my own mana, which also sliced through the mana beast leather beneath it. Nico twitched in pain as my blade met flesh, scoring a shallow cut along his upper arm. Instead of falling back and

regrouping, he drove his shoulder forward, pushing the edge of the blade deeper and forcing me to pull my strike or risk causing him real harm.

I didn't see the punch coming until it was too late.

Nico's fist, wrapped in flames, cracked against my cheek. My own mana blunted the strike, but the soulfire sent agony shooting across my cheek and up into my eye. I stumbled back before going to a knee, then laid down my weapon in a sign of surrender to end the bout. "What the hell, Nico…" I grumbled, rubbing my eye, which was watering and immediately irritated, blurring my sight on the right side. "This was supposed to be infusion only. No mana arts."

"Especially not Vritra-based spells," Melzri drawled, amused. "Still, it was a good tactic. Sacrifice a small wound to deliver a—if this were a real battle against a different opponent—fatal attack. Nicely done, Nico."

I turned to glare at Melzri. "It was hardly 'nicely done.' Nico took advantage of my adherence to the established rules of our fight to strike an unfair blow."

"Following rules of engagement in battle is a paradox," Melzri answered, watching me carefully. "Slavish adherence to such rules only serves your enemy."

"But we're not enemies." Standing beside Melzri, Caera's face looked pensively between Nico and me.

It's been months, and I'm still doing that, I thought, frustrated with the situation and myself. Somehow, it was still so hard to think of the person beneath that navy hair, those ruby red eyes, and her crown of horns as *not* Caera. And yet it was impossible to view her as Caera, either, because the two were so different. And so I thought of Caera's hands, her face, her arms now covered in runic tattoos that ran up her neck, instead of thinking of her by name.

Cecilia, I told myself, standing slowly. *Her name is Cecilia.*

"You…okay?" Nico asked, finally, if fleetingly, meeting my eyes.

“Fine,” I answered firmly, staring into the side of his head until he cleared his throat and made a show of turning his back on me to walk away, acting as if he were simply resetting the battlefield.

Melzri chuckled as she tossed her snow-white hair back, settling it around her horns. “I think that’s enough swordplay for the moment. Grey, Cecilia. Spells only. No movement.”

Nico sent his blade into an extradimensional storage device around his wrist and hurried away from me. I looked down at the charwood sword in my hand. It wasn’t a training weapon, even if it looked mostly like the blunt sticks Nico and I had been hitting each other with since we were children. Its edge had been carved down to be sharp as a razor, and the flat was imbued with several runes that bound the weapon to me, making it difficult and painful for anyone else to use, but also fortified the charwood. In the end, it still wasn’t as durable as a steel sword, but the charwood channeled mana much better than any metal weapon I’d ever held. With enough application of mana, it would be far stronger than the simple blade Nico wielded.

Regretfully, I too reached for the mana that would open my dimension ring, then stored the blade away. I knew what was coming, and I wasn’t exactly looking forward to it.

As Nico and Cecilia passed each other, she reached out and squeezed his hand, then pulled him to her and quickly kissed his cheek.

My gaze fell to the ground.

“Hey, none of that shit on my watch,” Melzri barked. “You’re the Legacy, not some love-sick schoolgirl. I don’t care if you *have* been dead and separated for however long.”

“Sorry, Scythe Melzri Vritra,” Cecilia said, blushing and offering the Scythe a quick bow before hurrying into place opposite me.

I tried to clear my head, but the throbbing in the side of my face only intensified as I watched Cecilia approach. Channeling wind-attribute mana, she conjured a cushion of air beneath herself, carefully crossed her legs, and settled atop it, hovering about two feet off the ground.

I couldn’t help but grind my teeth. *A few months, and already she is capable of something like that.*

The rapid purification of her core and expansion of her abilities had been far beyond anything I could have expected. It seemed to defy every law of magic I had learned in this world. I myself had a regalia, two emblems, and a crest, providing me aptitude with three of the four traditional elements. I also learned some of the Vritra mana arts, focusing on bile water and void wind to compliment—or counter—Nico’s specialization of soulfire and blood iron.

But Cecilia had only needed time to grow acquainted with the body she now inhabited before almost immediately displaying affinity with all four elements and each of their possible deviants, and without any additional runes bestowed after her reincarnation.

This was another thing I found myself doing often: I couldn’t bring myself to acknowledge the full truth of Cecilia’s presence in this world with us. Because it hadn’t simply been her reincarnation; she hadn’t randomly inhabited a body or been reborn into her own. No. Her spirit had required a vessel. *And Caera’s had to be displaced in the process,* I thought with a building anger. *Agrona killed her.* Cecilia *killed her.*

Melzri said something that I didn’t catch, and then mana swirled into a visible spell around Cecilia.

Jerking out of my stupor, I formed a barrier around myself, already on the back foot due to my poor focus.

A blue bolt of lightning crashed against my shield, followed by the crack of concentrated thunder. The sound-attribute deviant mana, purified in Cecilia’s core, shivered through the barrier protecting me, starting at the point of the lightning strike and rippling outward, like a stone thrown into a pond.

I leaned into the barrier, reinforcing it with all the mana I could muster. I felt Cecilia pushing into the center of the ripple with her will, not casting a spell but simply pushing on the mana directly by opposing my control over it.

The shield melted away suddenly, and a concentrated fist of wind struck me in the chest, lifting me off the ground only to slam me onto my back and send me sprawling.

“Grey, you moved.” Melzri’s voice was followed with the flare of mana, then a whip of black flames licked across my back.

My vision went white for several seconds as pain overwhelmed me.

“I think that was a new record, Cecilia,” Melzri continued, disregarding me writhing on the ground. “But your use of mana is lazy. While it is impressive that you were able to burst his shield almost entirely by opposing his control over the mana, that ability is a crutch. If you learn only to overwhelm your opponents by sheer force of mana, then you will fail to foster the creativity necessary to make use of your full range. You are the only mage in Alacrya who can control all attributes of magic. Make use of that.”

“Yes, Scythe Melzri Vritra!”

“Grey, get your ass up. Let’s go again. And focus this time!”

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and pushed myself up with shaking arms.

Life became an unhappy haze of repetition as the gap between Cecilia, Nico, and I grew wider. My sense of powerlessness only deepened, a dark and empty well that yawned beneath me. And if I looked down into it, I knew I might fall and never recover. If not for Agrona’s continuing push for us to live, study, and train as a group, I couldn’t have borne it.

“You’re angry, Grey. Good.”

My jaw clenched until it ached, and I tried not to glare at the High Sovereign.

“Use it, boy. Don’t hold back. Your rage is a survival mechanism, meant to push you past the threshold of your abilities. To rein it in is to hobble yourself. If you make less of yourself than you could be, then you are simply waiting for death.”

I took my stance and glowered at Nico across from me. A heavy weight settled over my limbs as Cecilia suppressed my mana, forcing me and Nico to rely only on our combat training. I saw her mouth, “Sorry,” out of the corner of my eye. *If only Agrona would ever match me against* her *without our mana. Then I wouldn’t be so damned powerless against her.*

I shook off the thought, focusing.

“Begin.”

This time, Nico lunged to my right, opening aggressively. His blade *thunked* against mine. I stepped into the attack, forced his blade out of the way, and planted my foot between his own. But his lunge had been a feint, and he pirouetted around me, his blade turning to a reverse grip and thrusting backward at my stomach.

I struck the flat of his weapon with my palm and again stepped into his attack, too close for swords to be fully effective. My elbow snapped up toward his mouth, but he twisted and took the blow on the jaw as he pulled his sword back toward him, slashing across my body. My own sword whirled into place, deflecting the cutting edge from my skin. Without mana imbuing the charwood, I felt the steel bite into the razor thin edge of my weapon, notching the blade.

Feigning a step back, as if I were correcting my stance, I unleashed a forward kick at the side of his knee. Too late, Nico tried to correct his footing, but my boot impacted firmly, bending his leg sideways with an awkward *pop*.

Nico grimaced and flourished his weapon defensively, creating a barrier between us, but there was blood in the water now, and I could smell it. Springing off my back foot, I lunged forward and struck directly at his sword’s handguard. His attempted block was clumsy, and the blade was jolted out of position. I thrust forward, pushing the edge of my charwood sword across his ribs.

He tucked in toward the wound, bringing his head down into my knee, which connected with the crunch of breaking cartilage.

Nico stumbled and fell back, his weapon wheeling across the floor with a dull scraping noise.

I turned angrily toward Agrona. “We all know I’m the better swordsman. What is the point of this exercise?”

Agrona's smile sharpened. “Healer, get Nico on his feet. Then, we go again.”

My mana came back in a rush as Cecilia released the suppression in order to aid Nico’s healing. Nico was silent as the healer eased the swelling in his knee, set his nose, and stopped the bleeding from the cut across his ribs, but I could feel him seething. Cecilia watched everything nervously. She kept trying to catch my eye, but I ignored her.

When Nico was back on his feet, we returned to our starting positions and fell into our opening stances, waiting for Agrona’s word.

“Begin.”

Nico came forward from a high stance. I opened with an overhead block, my feet already aligned with my path through the strike and behind Nico, where I would deliver a slash to the back of his legs.

Our two weapons met. Steel again bit into the unprotected edge of the charwood. The weapons caught each other with the expected resistance, jerked, then continued forward through each other.

A bright line of pain ran across my shoulder and down the outside of my arm.

The last two feet of black wood clattered to the ground, bouncing. In my hands, I held only the handle with a foot of blade, sliced cleanly off on the end.

I kept with my original motion, but instead of attacking the back of Nico’s legs, which my weapon was no longer long enough to reach, I spun and released the hilt.

Nico had stepped through his swing and half turned, hesitating as he looked down at the charwood blade as it bounced a second time, spinning as if in

slow motion.

The remaining length of blade struck his unprotected sternum, sinking into the hilt. Nico's eyes went wide with surprise, his mouth forming a soundless, "Oh." He stumbled backward once, tripped over the still-bouncing charwood blade, and fell to the ground with a crash.

There was a moment where no one moved, then Cecilia's scream of, "Nico!" split the air like a thunderclap.

She ran to his side and reached for the hilt, but her hands hovered over it fearfully. "Help!" she called, her eyes wide and wet with fright as she looked for the healer, but he was watching Agrona, waiting for the High Sovereign's command.

As Cecilia's emotions surged with turmoil, her will crushing down on my mana jerked back and forth like a wolf tearing at its prey. "Release my mana, Cecilia."

"Agrona!" Cecilia yelled, staring at the High Sovereign with a sort of pleading confusion.

"Cecilia, release my—"

"Shut up!" Cecilia screamed, and something inside of me *tore*.

I collapsed like a puppet with cut strings, my hands clawing at my sternum. The mana, previously constrained to my core by Cecilia's power, was leaking out and growing dim. Outside my body, the warm sense of mana that radiated from everyone in the room grew cold. I gasped, unable to breathe, choking on my own dread, drowning in my fear.

"Healer, see if Nico can be saved."

My eyes closed. My ears rang so loud that the words became almost unintelligible.

"And the other, High Sovereign?"

"The boy's purpose is complete. Leave him."

My fingers went numb, and I could no longer feel them digging into my skin, desperate to reach the pain inside my sternum. Bile filled the back of my throat.

“Don’t worry, Cecilia dearest. Remember, while an anchor may give you stability, it will also hold you back. I think you have reached the point where the weight of such relationships must be cut loose. It is time for you to fly free.”

Cecilia’s sobbing was the last thing I heard before the world went black.

And then, within the black, a faint bit of distant light.

The light grew closer, brighter, and then turned into a bright blur, forcing me to shut my eyes. Indiscernible sounds assaulted my ears. When I tried to speak, the words came out as a cry.

“Congratulations, sir and madam, he’s a healthy boy.”

Everything came rushing back in, and I remembered where I was and what I was doing. The context of the life I had just lived fit into place, as did the previous attempts. It all felt like a horrid dream, but it didn’t fade as I woke.

Because I’m not really awake.

I forced my infant body to quiet and ignored the fussing going on around me as I turned my focus to the puzzle of the keystone. *I can’t lose myself every time I try to do something different*, I thought in frustration. *How can I solve a puzzle if I forget what I’m doing every time I pick up a piece?*

Full of the chill of that sad, unwanted existence in Alacrya, a shiver ran through me. For the first time, I felt the fear that I might truly be trapped in the keystone forever. I clung to my mother’s warmth with genuine need but couldn’t escape the feeling of melancholy loneliness that subsumed all other feelings. In many ways, I had forgotten what it was like to feel alone, to be by myself in my own head. I wished I could take comfort from mother and father, but in that moment, with the life of Grey in Alacrya still so fresh in my mind, I couldn’t entirely accept them as real.

Sylvie, Regis, where the hell are you?

46

BECKONING FATES

MY INFANT YEARS passed by unattended, my life happening on a kind of autopilot as my mind focused on the problem of the keystone and my missing companions.

In this alternative reality presented by the keystone, even small changes seemed to snowball into an entirely new life that I had to live. But as the simulated life got further from reality—or perhaps, as the person I grew into inside the keystone became further from who I really was or had been—the part of my mind that was conscious of events outside of the keystone seemed to go to sleep, causing me to forget my purpose and even the fact that I was living out a fake, simulated existence.

The memories of my time growing up in Taegrin Caelum resurfaced. It was difficult to parse everything; I remembered it clearly, but the person I had become under those circumstances seemed so far from who I actually was that it felt like I'd had someone else's dream. But where, I wondered, had that scenario come from? *Is the keystone realm just inventing responses to my actions, or is Fate somehow involved? Could the keystone know what really would have happened—or what will happen in the future?* I considered aether and Fate, and knew I couldn't completely discount this fact.

Elder Rinia could search through possible timelines and potential events using her magic. Certainly the djinn could do the same, with their heightened control of aether and the branch of aevum. Still, in comparison to the mechanism behind each of the previous keystones, these unfolding worlds and timelines seemed impossibly complex. *Does gaining insight into Fate require seeing how all these realities played out in response to each small change?*

I felt my stomach sink as I wondered just how many times I'd have to relive my life in different permutations to gain this insight. This nerve-wracking thought brought me to yet another unnerving consideration…

How long have I already been here?

If the keystone world moved at the same scale of time as I lived it, then I'd already been inside for decades. I had to assume that time spent in the keystone wasn't one-to-one with the outside world. Time didn't seem to move at a constant pace in the keystone, flying past at incredible speed when I didn't focus on the world it was presenting. If nothing else, that suggested that time was highly subjective, perhaps even an illusion entirely.

What if that's it? I jolted into a scene of my toddler self flipping through the Encyclopedia of Mana Manipulation. Staring around in confusion—it felt like I was born only minutes ago—I tried to draw myself back out of the life and allow it to simply play out before my eyes.

My excitement seemed to tether me to the moment. I squeezed my eyes shut, concentrating on disconnecting from myself. Something tugged at me from my sternum, like I had a fishing hook embedded in my chest and someone was pulling on it. My eyes flashed open, and I stared around, wondering what the sensation could have been, but I saw and felt nothing obvious.

Realizing I was letting myself get too anxious and excitable, I forced my small body to take several deep breaths. My mother came into the room, chattering away about me always staring at those books and how cute it was, and time began to spill away from me.

In moments, I was awakening, then we were already heading up the mountain path that would lead us to the ambush. It played out as it had in

life, and suddenly I was with Sylvia. Although I had ideas about how my time with her could have played out differently, I avoided changing anything, even the smallest detail, in order to test my current theory.

My time with her ran out, and then my life as a boy in Elenoir was speeding past. Before I knew it, I was seeing my family again, and then Jasmine and I were adventuring together in the Beast Glades. My time in Xyrus started, leading to Widow's Crypt, the attack on Xyrus Academy, and my training in Epheotus. The war itself was already over, culminating with my battle against Nico.

It was as my body began to fail from overuse of Sylvia's beast will and Sylvie's impending sacrifice loomed that I had another realization.

Focusing on the moment, I attempted to step back into my body and take control of the situation, knowing what I wanted to change.

Only I couldn't.

Time was passing by even more quickly now, with Sylvie's death, my first unintended ascent into the Relictombs, and then my time in Alacrya all going by in the same breath. Suddenly I was bidding farewell to Ellie, having lied to her about where I would be while accessing the fourth keystone, and Sylvie, Regis, and I were activating and stepping into the keystone again.

I waited in darkness, breathless and confused about what had just happened. Again, the light in the distance. Again, the words, "Congratulations, sir and madam, he's a healthy boy."

My mind was blank for quite a while. Time didn't slip away from me and start the loop over again, but I could feel the shock seizing control of my faculties, and instead of fighting it, I simply let myself be.

I had thought, perhaps, that the lesson of this place was something trite, like that my life had played out just the way it was supposed to or that I couldn't change the past. I certainly hadn't expected to lose control and get dragged along as my life repeated exactly as it had, unable to enforce my will on it at all.

It was like being caught in a rushing river, I thought in wonder after the shock began to settle. *But what is the point of that? How does it lead to insight into Fate?*

I struggled to see how this new data point fit in with my previous theories. Obviously, it shattered the idea of simply not changing anything. In fact, this vortex effect suggested the opposite: that I had to explore the many opportunities of this life—or lives—in order to gain insight into the aspect of Fate.

I rolled this idea around for quite some time but achieved no new insight. Finally, I turned away from it, again considering a moment from the previously rushed-through life. As I had approached Sylvie's sacrifice, a wild thought had occurred to me. *How can I exist in this life if Sylvie doesn't sacrifice herself for me, splitting her essence to be drawn across the cosmos where she then watches my life as Grey unfold? Because, if she doesn't do that, how can she then pull me away from Agrona's effort to reincarnate me and instead place me inside this body?*

I looked around, searching for the ghostly apparition of Sylvie that I knew must be watching me. After Sylvie had experienced my life as Grey, she had followed my spirit through the cosmos as it was dragged to this world by Agrona. At the last moment, she forced me aside and brought me to the Leywins. And that is where this simulation of my life began.

It was a paradox. Although the keystone lives always began at my birth, in reality, my own life began long before that, with my birth as Grey on Earth. I clung tightly to that fact. The presence of a potential paradox was a data point, a flaw in the system, one I could identify and potentially extrapolate information from.

'I suppose, in this place, my presence at your birth—and also everything I did before your birth—is like a fixed point,' a distorted voice said. I turned my overly large head on the neck that still didn't support it, staring off the side of a straw-filled mattress to see the same slightly see-through, younger version of Sylvie that I'd encountered before. *'You can't change something that was already set in stone before your arrival.'*

I was looking for you, I said, meeting her transparent golden eyes.

‘I know,’ she answered.

I have an idea, I thought, instinctively stuffing a chubby fist into my mouth. *Will you help me with something?*

‘In the context of this life as it is currently playing out, I have just watched Grey grow from desperate childhood to disconsolate kingship. I then crossed an unknowable expanse across time and between worlds to keep Agrona from claiming you,’ she thought back matter-of-factly. *‘I have already sacrificed everything for you, Arthur, and I will do so again. And again. As many times as is necessary. So yes. Of course I will help you. Just tell me what you need.’*

I quietly gathered my thoughts before projecting them to her. *You are a part of Sylvie. Before, you called yourself a projection of Sylvie as I understood her to exist in this moment, right?*

‘That’s correct,’ she confirmed, watching me curiously.

But there is another part of Sylvie here as well, I continued. *Her real conscious mind from the outside world. Except she’s…sleeping, her and Regis.*

‘That’s true.’

My infant face scrunched up in concentration. *Her mind hasn’t woken yet. I think, maybe, that’s because it hasn’t had a time and place to do so inside the keystone. Even in the lives where I’ve bonded with her, that version of Sylvie has her own personality intact, consistent with who Sylvie was in that timeframe, without the memories of our life outside this place. That leaves no room for my Sylvie, the real Sylvie, to wake up.*

The ghostly face watched me expectantly.

But you’re already only a piece of her. And in a few years, you’re going to be drawn back into your own egg and reborn as that version of Sylvie.

‘That’s also true.’

If you…attached yourself, somehow, to Sylvie’s mind—the real Sylvie—then maybe she could wake up and act through you, and then be born back into

herself.

There was a long pause, and I had to concentrate very hard to keep my mind and infant body awake and focused on the moment.

'How?' she asked eventually.

I didn't really know how, but I was convinced that waking Sylvie and Regis was essential to making progress within the keystone. They represented different aspects of aether that, together with me, forged a more complete insight of spatium, vivum, and aevum as a whole. It was my hope that, as outside consciousnesses, they wouldn't suffer the same effects of deviating from my regular life and could somehow tether me to myself.

It's all guesswork at this point, but I can feel Sylvie's mind inside my own. Can you…enter my body? Maybe I can act as some kind of bridge between you.

The ghostly image nodded in understanding, then drifted forward, passing through the bed and into my flesh. A shiver ran through my tiny body, and I could feel a new, comforting presence floating just beneath the surface.

Wiggling, I got more comfortable on the straw mattress and closed my eyes.

Her mind is inside me somewhere. We just have to find it.

I focused on the ghost's warm presence, trying to follow her within myself as she searched for the real her. Such an internal, meditative practice would have been easy in my years as a quadraelemental mage or later, once I had an aether core. I'd practiced searching inside of myself with mana and aether for more hours than I could hope to count.

But now, in the body of a tiny baby with no mana core of my own, I realized that I lacked the facilities I would normally rely on.

Do you feel any sense of her? A resonance, or a pull, or anything?

'No, but don't despair,' she assured me.

As my focus homed in on finding Sylvie and forging a connection between the two partial versions of her—one real, the other manifested by the keystone—I lost my sense of the outside world. Even when my infant body

slept, my adult mind remained intent on the connection between Sylvie's apparition and her sleeping mind. Time passed discordantly, with the outside world seeming to rush by while only minutes or hours passed according to my consciousness.

And yet I sensed nothing concrete within myself but the mana slowly concentrating inside my sternum, where my core would eventually form.

'This isn't working,' ghost-Sylvie thought, her voice cutting through the fog of my hyper-concentration. *'We need to do more, but what? I have no knowledge of this process.'*

I took several deep breaths, struggling to think through the building tension. *In a couple of years, your spirit naturally rejoins your unborn body, held in stasis by your mother's magic. And then later, you are reborn through a natural process I don't fully understand, a combination of a magical reaction to your sacrifice and a tremendous amount of aether channeled into that second egg.*

'Both rebirths then required an egg…' she mused, her mentally projected voice quiet in my head, nearly buried beneath the thumping of my pulse. *'But both were also influenced by outside magic tying back to the sacrifice of my body to rebuild yours. We need a catalyst to awaken the real me and bond me with this simulation of myself.'*

But what kind of catalyst would suffice?

The ghostly apparition of Sylvie didn't answer. She was gone.

I let time pass, thinking about my next steps, until I reached the cliffside and once again saw her. But the battle exploded, and I followed along with the necessary sequence of events that would lead me to Sylvia. I looked for a time or way to communicate with the watching ghost, but no such opportunity presented itself, and then, once again, I was tumbling from the cliffside.

By the time I came to at the bottom of the long fall, lying next to the broken corpse of the bandit I had dragged down with me, Sylvie was already gone.

I considered simply allowing the simulation to play forward to its beginning again in order to continue my attempt to wake Sylvie, but the idea of

wasting an entire life simply watching it fly by chafed at me. It was obvious now that my goal of waking the real Sylvie into the ghostly manifestation of her spirit would be a work of more than one lifetime, but there was still a lot I didn't understand about the keystone trial, and I didn't want to waste an opportunity to learn more, either.

I continued on until Sylvie was reborn, but she was not born with any memories, either of her life outside the keystone or our discussions before her birth. She was an infant asura, growing quickly in both intellect and power, but she was Sylvie as she had been then, not my companion as she now slept.

My time in Elenoir and then as an adventurer and student unfolded without significant change, but I remained watchful of each passing decision to avoid the vortex effect pulling me straight through to the end again. It was difficult, as I lived through the same events yet again, to avoid second-guessing the many decisions of my life. Where could I have chosen differently? What other power could I have gained or what piece of knowledge might I have obtained if only I'd walked a slightly different path?

Years passed before the moment I'd been waiting for came, and I sank into myself, becoming fully present in the unfolding events.

Virion was nodding to me as he dug into the inside pocket of his robe. "There's one last thing you need to think about."

I already knew what he was going to pull out when he opened his hand in front of me to reveal a black coin the size of his palm. The coin glimmered at the slightest movement, drawing my attention to the complex engravings etched all over it.

"This is one of the artifacts that were handed down to me. I had given them both to my son when I resigned from the throne, but after Alea's death, he gave this one back to me, saying I should choose the next Lance."

I stood there silently for a moment, carefully considering the oval coin that seemed to pulse in Virion's hand. "This is the artifact Alea had."

“Yes. Bonding it with your blood and mine will trigger it, giving you the boost that allowed all the other Lances to break into the white stage. I know you’re not an elf, but I’d be honored if you’d serve as a Lance under me.”

“I’ll fight for you even without this bond, but I can’t accept it. I may regret this, but it doesn’t feel right for me to cheat my way into the white stage. I’ll get there on my own.”

These words echoed back to me from what felt like a lifetime ago. It was true, I had reached the white core stage on my own, but it took so long… and when I finally came face to face with Cadell at the flying castle, it still wasn’t enough.

And soon after, I lost everything I’d worked so hard for when my core was broken.

“It would be my honor to serve as your Lance,” I said at length, bending into a bow before Virion.

The Lance ceremonies—the actual bonding of blood and service—had always taken place secretly, and so it was for me. Only Virion, his son Alduin, Lance Aya Grephin, Lord Aldir, and Sylvie were present, all gathered within an unadorned chamber deep within the flying castle.

I knelt in the center of the chamber, Sylvie sitting beside me in her small, foxlike form, her side pressed against my leg. Virion stood before me, while the others were half in shadow encircling us. He held out the black oval coin. Its etched surface reflected the dim light like stars on the ocean at night. After a few seconds, he released the coin. Instead of falling to the ground, it stayed where it was, hovering in the air between us at my eye level.

“Arthur Leywin, son of Reynolds and Alice Leywin, silver core quadraelemental mage. Unexpected protector and unlooked-for grandchild, raised among both humans and elves in Sapin and Elenoir, a child of two worlds. The title of Lance must not be limited by birth or status, or even race, and can only be earned through hard work, talent, and strength. In that, you may prove to be unparalleled.”

Virion gave a brief pause, letting his words sink in. “Arthur, do you swear to serve and protect me as commander of the Tri-Union’s military forces, the Eralith family, and by extension all of the people of Elenoir, elven or otherwise, and never to turn this power back against me, my family, or my nation?”

“I swear,” I answered firmly and honestly.

‘So do I,’ Sylvie said fiercely into my mind.

“As a Lance of Elenoir, do you swear to stand between me, and by extension all of Elenoir, and our enemies, no matter their strength or origin?”

“I swear,” I answered again.

Virion’s rasping voice was husky with suppressed emotion. “Will you submit yourself in blood and body to my cause?”

“I submit.”

“So these words are spoken”—Virion drew a knife and dragged it along the edge of his palm—“and so they are bound in blood.” As he said the word, his blood began to drip from his hand, hitting the black metal with small splashes.

He held out the knife, which I took. I tried to imagine how I would have felt in this moment, had it really happened. *Isn’t it really happening?* The thought came back to me so immediately, so unexpectedly, that I had to stop and think about it, reminding myself that I was still in the keystone, working toward a solution for the trial and insight into Fate itself.

“Go on, Art,” Virion said, his tone kindly. “I have faith in you.”

Standing, I set my jaw and cut myself as Virion had. “So these words are spoken, and so they are bound in blood.” Sylvie echoed the words in my thoughts, except hers were directed to me instead of Virion.

As my blood joined Virion’s, the surface of the oval coin rippled, and the blood was drawn into it. The coin pulsed with a tremendous fluctuation of

mana, then began to fall. I grabbed it before it had tumbled more than a few inches and inspected it intensely.

The artifact was heavy, smooth, and warm to the touch. Beneath the black sheen, there was now a hint of deep red. There was a strange kind of resonance between the mana within the coin and my own purified mana, like they were calling to each other. I yearned to let the mana free.

Virion beamed at me, his eyes sparkling with pride. “I name you Godspell, Lance of Elenoir. Welcome, Lance Godspell, to your service.”

Lance Aya stepped forward, her expression unreadable. “You will want somewhere quiet and…away from others for this next step.”

Virion made a low humming noise from his nose. “It takes time, but you should dedicate the next few days to the process. After that, you can approach it at your leisure—although, from what I’ve seen in the past, most Lances find it difficult to stop once the process has started.”

Lord Aldir spoke for the first time. “I hope you both know what you are doing. I can’t help but wonder if it wouldn’t have been better for Arthur to reach white core on his own.”

“We don’t have time for that,” Alduin cut in.

I could tell from Virion’s expression that he was torn. “We shall see.”

Mouth dry, I gave Virion a deep bow, then shallower bows to Lords Alduin and Aldir, then Sylvie and I followed Aya to a chamber that looked more like a forest glade than a room buried deep in the bowels of a flying castle. “Good luck,” she said with a coy wink before retreating back down the hallway with a sashaying walk.

‘Oh, this is exciting,’ Sylvie said, slinking around the chamber and sniffing the plants. *‘You’re going to be a white core mage. How long do you think it will take?’*

“We’re going to find out,” I said out loud, sitting down, crossing my legs, and holding the oval coin up in front of me.

Everyone in the hall held their breath as I came into view, silently waiting for me to speak.

I stood wordlessly and surveyed the outdoor gallery from atop the stage. Every person present seemed entranced, but I could hardly blame them. Bathed in light and posing dramatically next to the two blocks of ice, I knew I cut quite the heroic figure.

My long auburn hair was tied loosely in a knot, and I was garbed in a loose-fitting silk robe in the elven style. Completing my refined ensemble was a rich fur pelt, as white as snow, slung over one shoulder.

It seemed like only yesterday that I'd stood before all of Dicathen clad in extravagant armor that had dazzled the people. Now, standing in the column of light in my elegant attire, I knew I was more than just dazzling; I radiated an otherworldliness that matched even an asura like Lord Aldir.

Gauging my timing well, I turned my head, first to my left, peering deeply at the Vritra retainer encased in ice, and then to my right, repeating the action toward the second retainer.

The gallery, already quiet, took on a deep, breath-held silence as I turned back to face those present. Keeping my voice low and steady, I began my prepared speech. "Displaying the corpses of our enemies as if they are simple trophies or keepsakes for the masses to gawk at is something I deeply disapprove of, but those of you attending this event tonight aren't simple commoners. Each noble here knows that the workers, civilians, and inhabitants of your lands are waiting impatiently for news regarding this war. Until now, vague assumptions and baseless theories were the only things you could give them."

I paused, letting the quiet crowd simmer as they waited for me to speak again. "Born to a humble background, I have been able to climb to where I am now thanks to my family—as well as the friends I met along the way. I am now a Lance, and the youngest one at that, but I'm not the strongest." I smiled warmly to hide the lie I told. In truth, I was the strongest by a significant margin, but the narrative required an alternative view of events. "The Lances out there, some of whom are fighting battles as we speak, are

far above me in power, and yet even I was able to defeat not one but *two* retainers, the so-called ‘highest powers’ of the Alacryan army.”

I paused once more, letting the excited murmurs ripple through the crowd. “As you can see, I’ve sustained no injuries from my battle with these supposedly powerful forces, and am healthy enough to chatter on like this amongst a crowd of nobles.” I widened my smile as my comments elicited laughter from the audience.

Placing one hand on the tomb of ice holding the corpse of the retainer, Uto, I carefully shifted my gaze to where the Council was seated. “This is not only my offering to the Council, who has granted me this role, but is also a gift that I hope you can all take home and share with your people—figuratively, of course.”

Cheers and laughs erupted as I bowed, signaling the end of the speech. The illuminating artifacts turned back on as I jauntily descended from the stage, and Virion took my place. People clapped my shoulder or my back as I passed them, shouting out for me or trying to get me to stop and speak with them.

When Virion spoke, however, the crowd’s eyes were drawn to him, and the hubbub died down somewhat. “The Council thanks Lance Godspell for this gift. He has single-handedly changed the course of this war, proving without doubt that Alacrya’s forces are not indestructible, as our enemy has attempted to convince you.” Virion paused as the crowd cheered in response. “Already, our dwarven allies are assisting our greatest minds in reverse engineering the teleportation technology used by the Alacryans to reach our shores, and soon we will take the assault to them!”

The crowd roared even louder, the nobles momentarily forgetting themselves as they got caught up in Virion’s speech. Soon, a chant of “Lance Godspell, Lance Godspell” was resounding through the gallery.

Through the crowd, I caught sight of a particular pair of beautiful teal eyes, shining with delight, and I couldn’t help but smile in return.

Silver bells filled Zestier with the sweet sound of their ringing, mingling with the chirping of birdsong and the whisper of a light breeze through the boughs. Bright roses, peonies, lilies, and hyacinths splashed reds, oranges, pinks, and blues across the crowd gathered to either side of the street and perfumed the air with a bouquet of sweet scents. Elven children threw confetti of petals into the street ahead of us, transforming the paving tiles into a mystical highway of color.

Beside me, Tessia giggled as she watched a young girl, no more than three or four, overturn a basket full of rose petals, spilling them into a heap, then hurriedly wiggle chubby hands through the petals to spread them out as she looked around to see if anyone saw. Tessia reached down and brushed the girl's head lightly with her hand as we passed.

She turned to look at me, and I felt myself slipping away into those teal eyes, which shone turquoise in the sun. “I love you, *King* Arthur,” she said softly, my name barely a whisper on her lips.

“And I love you, *Queen* Tessia,” I answered. More than anything, I yearned to lean forward and kiss her painted lips, but I held myself back, submitting to the decorum of the day. In truth, I would have rather foregone the ceremony and pomp entirely and instead spent the day just the two of us, insulated from the needs of the wider world.

I admired my queen, who was draped in a fitted wedding gown of white lace, the long train that dragged through the flowers woven with emerald and gold vines that collected the petals as we moved. Her gunmetal silver hair fell in waves down her back, pinned with golden flowers inset with sapphire and emerald gems, and her face had been lightly painted, adding shadow to her eyes and a bright flush to her cheeks.

But as I looked at her and fantasized about a life outside of the public eye, I also considered my new role as king. Just coronated, my first act as the new ruler of all Dicathen was this very wedding, as agreed by her mother, father, and grandfather. Ours was a union that more completely aligned the human and elven races, but to me, it was the culmination of two lives lived. Being reincarnated in Dicathen had been a chance for me to discover who I really was, to have a family that loved me, but also to search out the kind of supportive and romantic love I had never experienced as Grey on Earth.

I will be the king here that I could never be as Grey, I thought, brushing my fingers along Tessia's arm, which was woven through my own. *And it will be because of you.*

I locked those words into my mind, promising myself to tell her later, in the safety and confines of our own chambers within the Eraliths' palace in Zestier. The flying castle would become our permanent home, but I had agreed to spend two full days in Tessia's birthplace as a sign of support and goodwill to her family and her people; even though I had been a Lance of Elenoir and was marrying their princess, it was still a shock for the elven people to bow before a human king.

I forced my gaze away from my wife. As I smiled and waved at the rows upon rows of onlookers, I saw none of the tension that I knew was simmering beneath the surface. Instead, these people welcomed me with joyous cheers and thrown flowers. Day by day, my hesitance toward accepting the kingship faded away. *I have trained for this over two lifetimes,* I reminded myself.

'There is no one better suited for the role in any of the three countries you now rule,' Sylvie thought from where she walked behind me, and I realized I must have let my thoughts slip out through our connection.

Thank you, Sylv. If what you say is true, it is only because I have you in my life. I wouldn't be the man I am today without you. I was careful to keep concealed my concern for her. My bond, who was like a daughter to me and Tessia, was infected with her father's poisonous magic. I hadn't even told her that he could take over her body and speak through her yet.

Our procession continued through the city of Zestier and ended on a raised balcony high in the branches of one of the great trees. Thousands of onlookers gathered on platforms spread around us. Tessia and I stood side by side, surrounded by her parents and mine, Virion, Lance Aya, and an entire retinue besides.

Feyrith Ivsaar III stepped forward from the retinue, taking the teal half-cloak that hung over my shoulder. I nodded to him and smiled, thinking about how funny and strange life could be that my once-rival had become such a close friend and advisor.

Stepping forward, I projected my voice with mana so it would carry easily to the spread-out platforms grown into the boughs of the massive trees. With an easy smile and a baritone rich with warm confidence, I addressed my subjects as a married man for the first time.

I awoke to a sharp tug in my sternum. The moon spilled silver light through the window and across the floor but left most of our bedchamber pitch black. My fingertips pressed into my sternum, and I jolted awake as I felt wetness. Waving my hand, I attempted to conjure a flame to see by. The chamber remained in darkness.

Gasping in pain and sudden, horrible realization, I reached desperately for my magic.

There was no response.

My body spasmed at the same time as the lantern beside our bed bloomed with orange light. Tessia was asleep beside me, her hair a tangled mess around her face, her limbs askew, half in and half out of the blanket. Her lips curved up in a secret, sleeping smile as she dreamed of something pleasant.

Beyond her, beside the bed, a man tinkered with the lighting artifact, turning down the brightness slightly. There was no mistaking his marble-gray skin, red eyes, and the onyx horns that curved down the sides of his head, following his jawline.

Sylvie, to me!

I felt no response to my frightened call, which only heightened my fear and disorientation.

The Vritra—the same one who had killed Sylvia all those years ago—raised a finger to his lips. The gesture seemed strange and out of character, like something from a dream. “Do not shout for your guards, my king,” he said, his voice cold and hard. “My soulfire burns within you, and I have

destroyed your core. Although you still draw breath, you are, in reality, already dead."

I opened my mouth to shout, but pain wracked my body, clenching my throat shut and making my limbs spasm. Beside me, a concerned frown formed on my wife's face, and she rolled over fitfully.

"You are a victim of your own success, King Arthur," the Vritra continued. "Had you proven less successful—less powerful, less of a threat—perhaps the High Sovereign would have attempted to bargain with you." He gave a small shake of his head, and an expression that was almost, but not quite, a smile crossed his face. "I'll be honest, I would have liked to see what you were capable of, but the High Sovereign thought a simple assassination best."

Through the pain, I reached for Sylvie again, but I couldn't sense her mind. I didn't know if she could even hear my thoughts.

"Still, you have served your purpose," the Vritra mused. "The way is paved for the Legacy." His hand reached out toward Tessia, and I found myself powerless to stop him as he rested his outstretched fingers on her neck. Black, ghostly flames wreathed his hand for a moment that felt like an eternity, then flowed into her like smoke through her pores.

My wife's beautiful eyes snapped open, her mouth stretching wide in agony, but only a brief, choked gasp escaped her. Tears spilled from her eyes before they rolled back into her head, and she slumped.

"N-no…" I moaned, extending a trembling arm toward her. The world went white, then black, then gray slowly faded back in. The bed beside me was empty, and I could no longer see the Vritra, but I couldn't turn my head to search the room. Vaguely, I was aware that I was now lying in a wet pool, the fine sheets of my royal down mattress sticking to my skin.

"Don't worry, boy." The Vritra's voice came from somewhere beyond the edges of sight. "Your queen lives, and will continue to do so, after a fashion. I am told she will become one of the most important people in the world."

I closed my eyes, pushed out a shaking breath, and failed to draw in another one. Alone in a bed full of blood, I felt the soulfire burn through the last of my lifeforce, and everything went dark.

And then, within the black, a faint bit of distant light.

The light grew closer, brighter, and then turned into a bright blur, forcing me to shut my eyes. Indiscernible sounds assaulted my ears. When I tried to speak, the words came out as a cry.

“Congratulations, sir and madam, he’s a healthy boy.”

My eyes struggled open, and I cried. I howled with the despair of waking and realizing that the life I’d lived was a dream. A beautiful, wonderful, horrible dream.

Mourning that version of myself, of the love I had been allowed to share that I had withheld from myself in my real life, I could only plead with the keystone. *Enough,* I begged. *I don’t want to keep doing this. Please. That is enough. Let me go.*

47

CRACKS IN THE ICE

VARAY AURAE

“If the army attacks, I don’t think we have the forces to hold them back.”

“Of course we don’t! We haven’t had a chance to recover from the war and the Battle of the Bloodfrost. Without the dragons, we might as well throw open the gates and let the enemy march right on in!”

“Spoken like a true Beynir.”

“How *dare* you, madam! House Beynir is the oldest and most loyal supporter of House Glayder!”

“And yet Sir Lionel, your brother, was part of a treasonous plot to take over the Wall and hold it alongside the Flamesworths for his own personal enrichment.”

“That was—”

“Enough.” Lord Curtis didn’t raise his voice in anger; instead, he just sounded tired.

I glanced at him surreptitiously from the corner of my eye. He had dark bags under his eyes, his usually impeccable mahogany hair was disheveled,

and there was a certain softness to the way he slumped into his chair that reminded me intensely of his father.

Beside him, Lady Kathyln looked as she always did: rigid, sharply aware, and immediately present in the conversation. Her dark brown eyes gave away no hint of her thoughts, and, unlike her brother, not a single jet-black hair was out of place as it framed her pale face and cascaded down her straight back.

Even the mana the two royals exuded was the polar opposite; Curtis's flickering and fiery mana seemed to ebb and flow with every comment, while Kathyln's was still and stoic, just like her.

Across the ornate table from the royal siblings sat their council. Otto Beynir, a short, pudgy man with particularly unhealthy-looking skin, glared at Lady Vesta of House Lambert. The older woman, who looked every bit the part of the elder stateswoman of her house in her puffy purple and maroon dress and her silly feathered hat, did not glare but simmered with derision, one brow raised and her lips slightly pursed.

Sir Abrham of House Astor, a man of middle years with a paunchy belly and a patchwork beard from the scar across his left side, cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I struggle to see how Otto is wrong here, Vesta. Look at the facts." He stabbed the mahogany tabletop with a calloused finger, his mana wavering with suppressed nerves. "We put everything we had into guaranteeing a relationship with the dragons, but they've up and left us to die. Arthur Leywin's mysterious strategy has spread Dicathen's defenders thinly across the continent. We're facing an opponent who already defeated us once, and handily I might add. The only positive development I can see is that the Alacryan forces haven't turned their attention to Etistin yet."

Miss Mountbatten trembled as she leaned forward over the table. The elected voice of the commoners, Dee looked more like a baker than a royal counselor, but she was normally a voice of reason within the council's politics. "I still don't understand. You promised that the dragons would protect the people!"

Jackun of House Maxwell let out a booming laugh, causing a surge of mana to ripple through and around him. The retired warrior was a big man, and

when he wished it, his voice easily swallowed everyone else's. “They’ve left us proper fucked. It’s clear we were utter fools to ever put faith in them.”

A chorus of admonishments erupted around the ornate table, but Jackun waved them off with his customary disregard for the expected niceties.

“This isn’t helpful.” The council chamber fell silent as Lady Kathyln’s icy voice cut across their arguments. All eyes turned to her, even her brother’s. Her steady gaze swept across the counselors. “You forget yourselves, all of you. Our purpose here is to serve the people of Etistin, and all of Sapin. This panic, infighting, and fatalistic complaining hardly does so. We are not defeated, so we are not abandoning our duty.”

She paused, inviting the counselors to respond, but the chamber was the quietest I had ever heard it. Within the silence, though, was a palpable tension that I sensed as a kind of focusing of the multiple mana signatures. An expectant shiver ran through my core, and I shifted uncomfortably.

“We have made mistakes, all of us,” she continued, some of that sharp edge leaving her tone. “Curtis and I were eager to believe the dragons were our salvation, and perhaps we have allowed that desire to cloud our judgment. But you all speak as if hope is lost when there is a greater plan unfolding that we don’t fully understand.”

Otto Beynir scoffed. When Kathyln answered with a piercing glare, the shifty little man at least had the good graces to appear apologetic. “My Lady Glayder, it would be a fool’s hope to trust that Arthur Leywin can stop what is unfolding.”

“Was it not Arthur who warned us not to trust the dragons?” Kathyln interjected. “I am ashamed to have allowed the malcontent of this counsel to convince me that it was Arthur who posed a danger over the dragons.”

“Lady, let’s not act as if Arthur Leywin is infallible,” Beynir countered. “If the messages we have received are correct, the Alacryans so ignorantly ‘imprisoned’ on the other side of the Wall have turned against us, and Alacryan forces have struck out across most of Dicathen. The only saving grace at all is that they seem to be focusing their efforts on finding Leywin himself.”

Florian Glayder, third cousin to Curtis and Kathyln, brushed his fingers through hair that matched Curtis's in color before speaking for the first time in several minutes. "And that, I think, is our strategy. We have already evacuated the surrounding countryside, bringing everyone within fifty miles behind the walls. We have provisions to last through a siege if they attempt such a thing, which would be unlikely since Lance Godspell is not within the city anyway. We just need to stay within our walls and wait."

"Perhaps it would be best if the man were caught," Vesta said tentatively, as if she were verbally testing the waters of this line of thinking.

My gaze jumped to Curtis and Kathyln. Curtis leaned forward and rubbed his chin with his fingers, a small frown creasing his brow as he considered his advisor's words. His mana jumped and sparked like a fire struggling to catch in wet wood. Beside him, his sister had frozen, her mouth open slightly, a crack in her carefully managed facade.

"Finally, the lady from House Lambert speaks sense," Otto said, throwing up his hands.

"That's a terrible thing to say," Miss Mountbatten said at nearly the same time.

"Now, Dee, it may seem cruel, but think about it," Abrham interjected with a gesture of peace. "Arthur Leywin has been antagonistic toward the dragons and disrespectful to Lord and Lady Glayder. If the enemy wants him this bad, finding him might just give Guardian Charon enough time to settle whatever emergency he's been called to so he can sweep the rest of the Alacryans from the continent."

"The dragons spit in your face, and you open your mouth to drink it in like fresh spring rain," Jackun growled, shaking his shaved head. "I don't care much for this high-and-mighty Leywin feller, but the dragons have shown us just how much they think of us. How many of those scaly bastards are in Dicathen? And they don't leave even *one* to guard Lady Kathyln and Lord Curtis? Nah, you'd have to be a complete moron to expect that they'll be back to help."

Otto leaned forward, pressing his palms into the tabletop. "Perhaps, but that doesn't discount the rest of the plan. We *know* where the Leywin boy is

hidden. We could eliminate two threats at once if we offered to trade that information for a promise of peace."

Kathyln's head tilted to the side, and her eyes narrowed dangerously. "So your suggestion is to offer the enemy what they want and beg for them to just leave us alone?"

"It would be a more sensible path than using the bodies of your people as shields for a man who refused even to explain why he expected us to die for him!" Otto barked.

There was a sharp scraping noise as Kathyln pushed her chair back from the table and stood suddenly. "You go too far, Otto. Go, now, and be glad that I'm allowing you to do so instead of locking you in the palace dungeon." Kathyln's glare was bitterly cold and empty of emotion. Her lack of anger only made the expression more cutting.

"L-L-Lady, I…" Otto stared at Kathyln with wide eyes as his voice left him, his mouth continuing to puff mutely.

"Kathyln—" Curtis started, reaching a placating hand toward his sister, but she silenced whatever argument he was preparing to give with a single look.

Curtis cleared his throat and stood, gestured for the chamber doors to be opened, then lingered beside them and spoke briefly to each counselor as they left. I followed behind Florian, but Kathyln spoke my name, stopping me and indicating I should stay. When all the others were gone, Curtis also dismissed the guards and then closed the doors behind them.

He regarded his sister warily. "That was poorly handled, Kathyln. These people are just as powerful as we are, perhaps even more so, and we owe much of our success to them."

"I do not see that as the benefit you seem to," Kathyln answered matter-of-factly. "They were out of line, and they needed to be reminded of their role here."

Curtis raised his hands in a gesture of peace. "I'm not suggesting we follow through with Otto's plan, of course, but they aren't exactly wrong to be scared."

Kathyln took a deep breath, outwardly settling her nerves. “I’m afraid Otto’s desire might come to pass even without our interference. According to our scouts, the Alacryans are growing near to finding the hidden cave. Our earth-attribute mages covered it well, but we can’t know what kind of magic these invaders may be using to search for Arthur.” Kathyln’s eyes met mine. “Lance Varay, I would like to know what you think we should do.”

My voice was slightly rough from disuse, and I had to swallow to wet my throat. “I do have a suggestion, but I’m…not entirely certain you will like it.”

Kathyln allowed herself the smallest of smiles, while Curtis crossed his arms and regarded me with undisguised concern. “Go on,” Kathyln said.

“Arthur made one thing clear to us,” I began, calling back to our last conversation with him before he went into hiding. “He asked us to do everything in our power to ensure that his location was not discovered. With the Alacryans searching the surrounding wilderlands, it seems like only a matter of time. We need to draw their attention in a different direction.”

“What exactly do you have in mind, Lance?” Curtis asked, stiffening.

“The coastline to the southwest is full of natural caves. The Alacryan forces haven’t yet concentrated on them, but we have reports of a few scouting parties moving in that direction.” I paused, knowing how the next part sounded. “I will fly there immediately and strike, acting as if I’m preventing them from searching the coast.”

“You would use yourself as a distraction?” Curtis asked, his voice full of disbelief. “Absurd. I know how powerful you are, Varay, but you can’t hope to fight off an entire army on your own. What if they are led by retainers or Scythes?”

Or even Wraiths, I acknowledged, though I didn’t speak the thought out loud. “The harder fought the battle, the more it will sell the diversion.”

“You are too valuable,” Curtis answered, shaking his head and taking a step closer to me and Kathyln. “I won’t allow you to risk yourself for Arthur, especially since we have received conflicting reports of his actual location.”

Kathyln’s brows rose. “Arthur has asked us to buy him time. If he had a reason to make us believe he was in that cave, then it doesn’t matter if he is actually there or not. We must act as if he is.”

“Of course, it matters,” Curtis countered immediately. “If he isn't here, then we don't need to risk Varay's life or the lives of the soldiers behind these walls.”

“And yet giving in and letting the Alacryans pass would allow them to search their next destination even more quickly,” Kathyln countered.

“That is a problem for the defenders of those locations then!” Curtis burst out, crossing his arms defensively.

A sudden crack silenced all three of us, and even Kathyln seemed surprised as she pulled back the hand that had just slapped Curtis’s face. Mana seethed between them, rearing up like two opposing hades serpents preparing to strike. But the shock and hostility melted away almost instantly, and Kathyln continued. “Are we not meant to be leaders, the hope and strength of Dicathen, not just of Etistin? Don't lose sight of the bigger picture. Do not become our father, Curtis.”

The royal siblings regarded each other for some time, Curtis’s hand still pressed against the cheek Kathyln had slapped. Although his face was pale except for the red mark where his sister’s hand had struck, his shock faded to a kind of steely grit, and he nodded, his eyes hardening with determination as he met first Kathyln’s eyes and then mine.

“Let’s discuss the specifics of this plan. Please, Varay, continue.”

With no time to waste, I provided the details of where I would strike and what my fallback plan was in the event that I became overwhelmed. And within the hour, I was flying southwest along the coast.

I kept high, within the cloud cover. Cold moisture collected on me, but I didn’t feel the chill. My mind remained abuzz with considerations of how the assault could unfold, and by the time I sensed the Alacryan search parties below, I felt confident in what was to follow.

Coming to a stop high above my targets, still shrouded within a dark cloud, I directed my senses toward the dim mana signatures on the ground. Four

battle groups moved together, scouring the countryside. By the way their formation moved, I was certain that at least two of the mages were Sentries. Spells were active, the crackle of their mana present in the atmosphere around the Alacryans and sparking like a lightning spell across the surface of water.

A deep, unfocused piece of me wondered what it would be like to see the individual particles of mana the way Arthur could. If he were present, could he tell me what the spells were doing just by looking at the way the mana formed? *But the entire reason I am here is because* he *can't be. And I need to ensure that he remains protected.*

The moisture within the cloud condensed into needles of ice, each one a foot long. These needles rotated around me as I drifted to the bottom of the cloud and emerged into open air. I already had a strong sense of exactly where my targets were, and it took only a moment to visually home in on the sixteen Alacryans. Aiming very carefully, I launched the series of needles in a sudden hail of death.

Barely audible cries floated up to me on the wind as half of the Alacryan mages crumpled, killed instantly by the strike. Shields of wind, water, and fire erupted colorfully over the remaining Alacryans just as a second volley of ice spikes struck them. A beam of sickly green mana speared through the air toward me, but I maneuvered around it easily before catching a series of blue fireballs on a heavy shield of ice.

I countered with more spells, which deflected off the interlocking shields. The Alacryans' shouts were unintelligible, but their panic was clear. They could do little aside from huddle beneath their shields with their last two Casters hurling weak spells.

Pushing mana into my eyes, I peered through the distortions in the air to watch them closely. A woman I'd identified as a Sentry was channeling a spell, her attention turned to the east, while a Striker rapidly scrawled across a crumpled parchment with a shaky hand. I hit the shields with more ice spikes, making sure not to overpower the mages conjuring them.

The Sentry's eyes snapped open, and she shouted something I couldn't make out. *Word sent. The cavalry should arrive soon enough.*

Weaving a net of fine, nearly invisible ice filaments, I cast it over the remaining enemies. A couple of Strikers darted out of the way with a burst of speed, but the others came together, hunkering beneath their protective barriers.

The fine filaments sliced right through the mana and eviscerated the handful of soldiers beneath it, dousing their spells in an instant.

The two Strikers sprinted away at impressive speeds. Instead of cutting them down, I floated back up into the clouds, vanishing the same way I had appeared.

My first series of strikes had been precise, killing the strongest mages and most of the Casters while only wounding the others. The following barrage had been weakened purposefully, pinning the Alacryans down but giving them time to send word for reinforcements with whatever artifacts or magic they had at their disposal. With that concluded, there was no reason to allow them all to live, but letting the final two Strikers escape provided a backup in the event that the earlier messages went awry. It should also, I calculated, provide a sufficiently believable outcome considering the image I was attempting to portray.

The dense cloud, heavy with moisture and already bitter cold, was the perfect staging ground for me to prepare for the next phase of this diversionary battle.

Drawing on the atmospheric mana, I felt it rush into my core and begin to purify. At the same time, using the technique Arthur had taught me while removing the asuras' limitations on my growth, I began releasing my own purified deviant ice-attribute mana, which clung to the vapor that made up the cloud. The sensation of mana rotation never failed to conjure goosebumps along the back of my neck as I absorbed mana, channeled it, and continuously clarified my core simultaneously. Even the simple act of clarifying my core felt strange and exhilarating after spending so long in the white core stage with no change.

The clouds around me began to harden, freezing into a kind of cocoon or shell, which my mana kept stationary. As that cloud froze, the effect

extended outward, the ice crawling over and through each vaporous mass, hardening and growing heavy in the air.

It required a meditative mindset to utilize mana rotation in this way, and my mind was full only of the act itself as I froze the very sky. I experienced no sense of time focusing so intently, and so it was with a slight jolt of adrenaline that I felt the approaching mana signatures in the distance.

At first, there were only two heavy, potent auras. The mages exuding them were confident enough that they approached openly, without attempting to suppress their signatures. I did not recognize the signatures, but based on their strength, I thought they couldn't be Scythes or Wraiths.

Confident as they seemed, the approaching signatures halted well away from where I'd defeated the scouting party. Churning behind them, only perceptible from this distance as their numbers grew, a host of Alacryan mages gathered as well. *Hundreds at least, perhaps thousands*, I thought in a detached kind of way. Once, perhaps, I would have balked at the idea of facing such a host. After all, hadn't Lance Alea and her entire regiment been defeated by only a single retainer and a much smaller force of Alacryan mages? *And yet much has changed since those days.*

Tense against the strain of holding such a great weight of mana-formed ice aloft, I waited. Continuing to utilize mana rotation, I did my best to suppress my own mana signature and disguise my mana usage within the dense, heavy atmospheric water- and air-attribute mana.

The retainers lingered at a safe distance, likely conferring with their Sentries or the heads of their various battle groups as they searched for signs of danger or hints regarding Arthur's whereabouts.

I breathed deeply and settled my mind. Patience was a skill I had cultivated from a young age. *The patience of the iceberg, of the permafrost,* I chanted silently to myself.

More and more Alacryans gathered until an entire army waited on the horizon. Then finally, at some shouted order, they began forward. The retainers stayed back, I was surprised to note, leading from the rear, but that suited my plan well enough.

Several battle groups collected around the corpses from earlier, investigating the evidence of our brief battle, but most marched toward the coastline behind me. They moved purposefully and with care, their Shields conjuring protective barriers of every element and design, while Casters and Strikers had their own spells at the ready, mana channeling into many hundreds of Alacryan runes all at once.

More and more of them entered the shadow of the frozen clouds, but I waited. The forefront of their lines passed beneath me, and I felt the touch of probing mana as the spell of some Sentry sought me out. A ripple ran through the army, and I *felt* as their collective attention turned fearfully skyward.

Gritting my teeth, I gripped the frozen clouds within my power and shoved downward. The ice slid smoothly around me as it fell, leaving me floating above the falling floor of rippling gray. The clouds plummeted, their unnatural movement looking momentarily unreal, like a child's drawing approximating reality.

I sensed the barrage of spells from below, even though I could not see it past the solid gray mass. Bolts of fire and jets of burning acid burned into and through the clouds but did little to interrupt the descent. Hundreds of shields flared bright.

Tons upon tons of solid ice struck the ground with a cataclysmic shockwave, and I forced mana to my ears to deaden the explosion of sound.

The frozen clouds shattered, becoming a maelstrom of razor-sharp blades of ice that flew in every direction. I pulled the shards back and forth across the shattered earth, and my enemies were as stalks of wheat beneath a thresher's blades. Mana signatures winked out like stars hidden behind storm clouds.

The attack lasted ten seconds, no more. From my vantage hundreds of feet in the air, the ground gleamed in blue, white, and red: snow and spikes of ice, as if a sudden and violent storm had raged, littered with the blood-soaked corpses of hundreds of Alacryan mages.

A black bolt of mana careened toward me from the distant figure of the retainer. I ducked beneath it, but it exploded, filling the sky with an

obscuring shadow that stole not only my sense of sight but seemed to smother my feel for mana also, well and truly blinding me. In the darkness, something hard and cold gripped my arms and clutched at my throat. The ice forming my left arm cracked, sending a shiver of phantom pain up into my shoulder and chest.

A frozen nova erupted from me, and the grasping limbs shattered. Freed from their unseen clutches, I dove beneath the darkness. Frost crept across my skin and armor, cladding me in a frozen barrier that deflected a burning glaive that glanced off my ribs before spinning around and returning to the hand of the man that had thrown it. The impact sent a jolt through me, and my core ached—*No, not an ache…a shudder?*—with the force of my focus on maintaining my defenses.

A statuesque man in black and crimson plate armor flew only a hundred feet away, and he caught the glaive as it returned to him, flickering with dark fire around his gauntleted fist. Silvery gray eyes shone from beneath his helm, through which protruded two short onyx horns. From the description I'd been provided, I knew this to be Echeron, retainer of Vechor.

Past him, hovering just above the ground a half mile or more distant, wrapped in a cloak of shadow that left her barely visible except for a shock of white hair and two bright yellow eyes, was the second retainer: Mawar of Etril.

Echeron swept the glaive across his body, and a wave of dark fire-attribute mana cut through the sky in an arc.

Condensing the ice around my body even further, I crossed my arms in front of me and plunged into the flames. Ice hissed and cracked as the flames sputtered and withered, and I punched out the other side. My arms slashed outward, and two blades of ice carved through the air before me and closed like scissors toward Echeron's neck.

He brought his burning glaive up, catching both attacks, and there was a burst of the dark fire. A flaming echo of my spell flew in reverse back toward me. I changed direction, dipping to my left, but the burning echoes followed as if tethered to me. I swerved again as a series of black bolts of mana launched by Mawar burst all around me like so many dark fireworks.

“Casters, fall back and attack from a safe distance,” Echeron ordered, his voice booming through the battleground below. “Strikers, Shields, and Sentries, focus on protecting your Casters!”

The rear lines of the Alacryan force had avoided the worst of my spell and were now scrambling back toward Mawar’s location. Some few survivors of the fallen ice clouds also managed to pick themselves up and drag themselves through the shattered landscape of broken rock and shards of ice.

I pulled up short as the glaive flew just in front of me, then rapidly hurled a series of frozen crescents toward Echeron. Dark fire enveloped him, and the crescents shattered ineffectively against his armor.

Every nerve in my body lit aflame as the echo of my own twin blades caught me from behind. They didn’t burn flesh or bone, but I felt them carving through my mana and burning up something I couldn’t name within me. Breathing rapidly, I dropped beneath a volley of spellfire from a pocket of Alacryan Casters, then reached for the atmospheric mana around Echeron.

The heat of his flames pushed back any natural cold or moisture in the air, and so I poured out my own, willing the air to freeze as solid as the deepest permafrost.

A crystalline barrier of ice formed in the air around the retainer, gleaming in the sunlight that hadn’t yet been swallowed by fresh cloud cover. But where the black fire touched my ice, the two forces spat and snapped, breaking each other.

A jagged bolt of lightning sparked across my back, and I went into a spin to avoid several other spells targeting me.

Within the cage of ice, Echeron was momentarily distracted, his focus on holding my spell at bay. When his glaive returned to him, however, it shattered the ice and snapped back into his hand.

A flick of my wrist sent dozens of spears of ice raining down on the closest Alacryan soldiers. Some burst against shields, but many more found their targets, and more mana signatures went dark on the ground below.

Echeron flew forward, his sudden movement causing a burst of noise and leaving a visible trail in the air. The burning glaive spun, leaving behind a black afterimage.

The ice of my left arm extended out into a shield, while a sword formed from many layers of overlapping blue ice appeared in my right hand. I smashed the glaive aside with the shield and thrust the sword at his hip. Shadows emanating from Mawar's dark signature condensed around him, forming into scything tentacles that writhed wildly as they caught and deflected my blow.

The glaive twirled and came down on the top edge of my shield. The haft flexed, and the blade parted the hair atop my head. I thrust up and away with the shield, then forward, smashing his gauntleted fists. As the shield went up, I drove the point of my sword down toward his legs, but again the shadowy tentacles deflected my blow.

Echeron pushed off my shield, flying into a backflip before thrusting forward again with the burning glaive. The impact of the blade against my shield rocked me back, and I felt the follow-up strike glance off my ice-covered side. I snapped my arm down, pinning the haft against my ribs, and swung the edge of my sword toward his shoulder. A shadowy tentacle wrapped around my arm, but I twisted my wrist and drove the point of the ice blade into the gap between Echeron's gorget and helmet. It trembled against his mana and was turned aside, but I felt him jerk next to me and saw blood at the tip of my sword.

As we fought, dozens of spells from the soldiers on the ground continued to hiss through the air all around us.

Echeron attempted to pull back and collect himself, but I kept his weapon trapped at my side. The shadow tentacles emerging from the dark creases of his armor snapped and cut like bladed whips, punching into my shield and sending cracks spider-webbing across its surface. A sharp pain radiated out from my shoulder, and I pirouetted away from the offending shadow, ripping the glaive from Echeron's grasp.

Several more spells from the remaining soldiers struck me, and there was a sharp tug from my core as mana surged out to maintain my protective

barriers.

Echeron eased back, watching me warily. “You Lances are more potent than I expected. You have fought well and earned a clean death.” His wariness melted away, and the glaive jerked free of my grip painfully, flew through the air, and settled back in his fist. He smiled haughtily. “Do not despair. Your people are simply unprepared to face the true might of the Alacryan continent—”

As he had been speaking, the core of his spear was freezing solid, my ice overtaking the runes embedded into the haft. The black flames moved jerkily, then froze in place around his arm, unnoticed by the retainer. It wasn’t until the frost had crept halfway up his arm that he noticed its burn through his heavy gauntlets.

Echeron cursed and tried to toss the weapon away, but it was frozen to his hand.

I met his eyes as they widened. My own face showed no emotion. “I offer you death in return, Alacryan, but it will not be clean.”

Flying backward toward his allies, Echeron continued to flail with the glaive, attempting to free himself of the creeping ice that now covered his entire arm up to his pauldrons. The protective shadows conjured by Mawar receded as the other retainer left him to his fate, prompting him to turn and shout, “Help me, damn it!”

Spells continued flying from the remainder of their army, but I deflected them with a sparkling curtain of ice-attribute mana, which also penned Echeron in, preventing him from retreating. His left hand was clawing at his right arm, the metal gauntlets scraping audibly across the layer of ice. This clawing became hammering as he drove his fist into the frozen appendage. With a sound like shattering crystal, his right arm broke off just below the shoulder, it and the spear tumbling together toward the ground a hundred feet below.

But the ice was in his mana veins, and from there, his channels. Normally the barrier of his flesh would have prevented me from controlling the mana in this way, but his own weapon and runes worked against him, as his

magic bonded to mine to create the echo effects he had used to attack me earlier.

In moments, the ice reached his core, and then he was falling. Gray eyes stared up at me in disbelief, and I watched as frost crept over them, turning the silver-gray to a blind blue-white.

When he struck the ground, he exploded into rough chunks of frozen red and bone white.

The spellfire from the remaining Alacryans momentarily eased.

Taking a deep breath, I refocused myself on mana rotation. My core ached with the effort of overcoming Echeron's mana, and I still had a retainer to face. As I did this, I flew down to the ground and picked up the frozen glaive, which had survived the fall intact. Flying only a few feet over the ground, I approached the Alacryan army. Mawar now hovered at the front, watching me with an unreadable expression.

The retainer had short, bright white hair that stood up in a series of spikes. Her predatory yellow eyes followed me closely out of midnight black flesh, and most of her body was indistinct, lost in a cloak of moving shadow.

I held up the glaive in one hand, parallel with the line of soldiers, then squeezed forcefully. The frozen haft shattered, and the two ends tumbled from my grip. "I give you all this one chance. Arthur Leywin is under my protection, as is this continent. Leave it now. Go to your High Sovereign and tell him that he has failed. Do not return."

Mawar didn't outwardly express any emotion at my statement. "Kill her."

My hand shot toward the sky, then dragged downward. A hail of ice spikes rained down on the force, manifesting from the shreds of the pale clouds that had filled back in above us. The soldiers collapsed into disarray as their Shields struggled to hold off the bombardment while the remaining Casters and Strikers just fought to stay alive.

A dozen dark and writhing bladed whips formed of shadowy mana snapped and speared at me from Mawar, and wherever they cut, the color bled from the surrounding area, leaving it cold and devoid of atmospheric mana. I dodged rapidly between strikes, building up my next spell.

Ice-attribute mana filled in a space the size of my fist, condensing until it became visible as a transparent floating sphere. As I flitted across the battlefield dodging Mawar's attacks, I put all of my mana toward this sphere. The transparent shell darkened, becoming white, then growing denser and taking on a blue color. I imbued into it not just mana but my intention, giving the spell both power and purpose.

When an opening between attacks appeared, I unleashed the sphere. It flashed toward the retainer, leaving a line of frozen air behind it.

Mawar gave a warning shout and melted into shadow before flitting away. The sweat on my brow froze as I gritted my teeth against the strain of the spell. As if I were pulling against thousands of pounds, I struggled to twist my wrist even slightly, causing the ice-crystal sphere to turn sharply and follow behind the streak of shadow, the air freezing behind it as it flew into the center mass of the retainer's shadowy form.

Mawar jerked to a stop, appearing as nothing more than a swirling incorporeal mass, at the center of which was the ice-crystal sphere spinning rapidly in place.

The trail of frozen air the sphere had left behind fell to the ground and shattered.

Tendrils of ice snapped through the shadows like bright blue lightning. Steam was rising from the shadow in a cloud, and where the cloud spilled over nearby soldiers, they screamed and their skin blackened from the cold.

Pain erupted in my leg as a bladed tentacle pierced the ice of my armor and my layer of protective mana. It parted flesh, cracked bone, and then stuck out the other side of my calf. I sank to one knee, largely ignoring the wound as I tightened my focus on the spell. The flashes of cold came in bursts, overwhelming my enemy's defenses with sudden spikes of power, and inch by inch the shadows solidified.

Suddenly the vaguely human-shaped shadow burst apart in a soft puff of black ice, and Mawar melted away. In the same moment, something slammed into me from behind.

I was thrown onto my face, then dragged up from the frozen ground by the tentacle piercing my leg. Upside down, I met Mawar's emotionless gaze; she was forty feet behind me, wrapped in darkness, and unharmed by the sphere of ice that was still pulsing and flashing.

Spells slammed into me from every direction, and I could only harden my barrier against them. The effort sent a quaking ache through my core, and I felt the leading edge of backlash cutting through my focus.

With a jerk of my limbs, I sent the sphere through the heart of the Alacryan army. Each pulse flash-froze a dozen men or more, but there were no cries of pain; they died with the air frozen solid in their lungs. The spellfire let up as mages dove out of the spell's path, but more of the tentacles were grabbing and striking me. Some turned aside, but others broke through my armor, and wounds began to accumulate all over my body.

The ice-crystal sphere curved around, passing through where Mawar stood, and again she melted away. I fell from the air, spun, and landed on my feet. The sphere was moving in a spiral pattern through the battlefield, and when it closed in on me, I grabbed hold of it and drew it back into my body, reabsorbing the mana I had spent in the casting.

A stabbing pain came from my core. I gasped and fell to my knees, clutching at my sternum as if I could dig it out of me. Something was wrong. Reabsorbing the mana should have eased the backlash, not intensified it.

Looking up slowly, realization dawning bitter and unwelcome, I watched as Mawar, once again hidden behind her remaining soldiers, raised a hand and shouted her orders. The Alacryan forces rushed back into formation, and dozens of spells again hissed through the air in my direction.

My head snapped back as the pain reached a crescendo. Never before had backlash felt as if something were ripping and clawing at my core from the inside. I grew cold and frightened, knowing that the retainer's shadow magic could be doing to me something like I'd just done to Echeron.

The army's spells closed in on me.

As one, the spells stopped.

I blinked away tears, staring at dozens of elemental bullets, balls of fire, bolts of lightning, and steaming rays of yellow and green mana that were hovering in the air around me. Time seemed to freeze.

Slowly, so very slowly, the core in my sternum cracked. I could *feel* the pieces begin to separate from each other.

The frigid claws of death beckoned to me, but I held them at bay. If I was to perish here, then I would not die alone.

Utilizing mana rotation, I fought to keep drawing in and cycling the mana that my core was no longer capable of manipulating properly, trying to shape and condense it to burst out like a bomb.

I felt something, some primal recognition, spark in my mind just as my core split open.

A scream ripped free of me, and with it a nova of bright blue mana.

As if seeing myself from above, detached from my own body, I watched as the nova moved outward, consuming the floating spells before colliding with the enemy force. In an instant, a hundred mages froze solid, their bodies clear as glass.

The expanding nova rippled, and cracks ran through it, then it was reversing, sucked back into me in a blink.

The explosion that followed shattered the glass soldiers and my consciousness both.

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TRANSCENDENCE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

"I think he's sick," my mother said, rocking me back and forth in her arms. "He's not eating, Reynolds, and he hasn't made a peep all day."

My father moved to stand at Mom's side. He stared down at me nervously. "I can send for the doctor?" He made the statement a question, his voice rising along with his brows as he regarded my mother uncertainly.

Mom's brows, on the other hand, descended thunderously. "*Can* you, Rey? That would be *lovely*!"

My father flinched back, rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, and mumbled, "Um, of course, I'll…" Whatever else he might have said trailed off as he hurried away.

Mom rolled her eyes at his back, then refocused her attention on me. "That father of yours…" She tried to smile, but the expression didn't quite reach her eyes. She poked my stomach gently, wiggling her finger back and forth to tickle me. "With any luck, you'll get his good looks but my brains, little Arthur."

I was aware of this exchange, but I did not *think* about it. My conscious mind sat nestled within my infant body, in control and living with it

moment to moment instead of allowing the keystone to pull time away from me the way you might pull a carpet out from under someone's feet. I clung to it, desperately intent on remaining myself, being *myself*.

I will not lose myself again only to wake up with the memories of another man's life, I had told myself repeatedly while pointedly not thinking about the heartbreaking events of my previous attempt at the keystone. And I meant to keep this promise to myself. Only…I still didn't understand how.

But I was starting to understand a piece of the keystone, at least. After my last life, I felt confident that I saw the trap in it—the reason one could not leave until they had "completed" the keystone—and why that was so unlikely. The lives lived were punishing in a way I hadn't expected. Already, my memories of these lives were full of bitterness, regret, and loss. Despite not really being "myself" during these events, the memories of my decisions, of my feelings—my deaths—were vivid.

I was still unsure if Sylvie and Regis, and their respective abilities, were central to my continued progress, but I *was* sure there was more to it than just that. Despite the djinn's ability of foresight, it seemed like a bridge too far to think that they had accounted for, expected, or even required the presence of three connected minds to enter and alter the keystone in whatever way would fulfill its purpose. What they *had* accounted for, on the other hand, was the requirement that a mage already know three very specific aether arts to have reached this point.

The abilities taught by the previous keystones had acted as keys to enter this puzzle, but as I sat within the days and weeks of mulling rumination, I grew more and more convinced that they had to be more than just keys.

After first arriving and experiencing the miracle of my own birth for the *second* time, I shouldn't have been able to see the aether gathering for my awakening, but I had. The importance of that had been lost on me in the following repeated attempts at this life, but in retrospect, this strange fact felt like some kind of clue or hint toward the keystone's solution.

But pursuing any clue was itself a problem I wasn't sure how to solve. After all, how could I attempt to make a change to learn more about it if the act of making that change meant I lost all sense of what I was doing, at least until

I was born yet again with an entirely new life's memories stuffed into my exhausted brain.

There has to be a way to navigate this place more purposefully, I told myself, thinking of the Relictombs and the Compass.

A cry erupted from my tiny form, and I pulled back, letting time pass as my mother cleaned and fed me, a distinctly uncomfortable experience to focus on. Before I knew it, I was a toddler yet again, already near my awakening.

I lurched back into the present with a jolt of fear. *I'm not ready to go further. Not yet.*

Perhaps due to my temporal proximity to the day of my awakening, I was again reminded of the strange sight of aetheric particles swarming as if to spectate that event.

I should not be able to see aether, but there are times I can. What could that mean?

Tentatively, I reached for Realmheart. My infantile body contained no godrunes, of course, but my real physical body did. If there were times I could see aether, it could only be because some sense of it was bleeding between the mental keystone realm and the physical world.

But if there was some physical connection, I could not find it. Like my search for Sylvie, attempting to activate Realmheart revealed nothing.

Sylvie…

'I am here.' The ghostly apparition of my bond manifested in front of me. She was sitting with her legs crossed and watching me carefully. *'It's fascinating. I can see it all in your mind, everything we've already discussed across these multiple lives you've lived.'*

Good; that at least saves me the trouble of explaining it over and over again, I answered, realizing I hadn't been shielding my thoughts at all, because there had been no need.

'To continue our previous conversation, I think I may have an idea.'

I waited, silently encouraging her to continue.

‘If we need a catalyst to wake the real Sylvie’s mind and allow me to bind to her, perhaps we can channel the energy of your awakening.’

How?

‘I have no clue.’

I sat with the idea for a while, trying to use what I knew about magic to piece together a possible solution. Unlike with Sylvie’s resurrection egg, however, I was not handed some strange mystical answer. Whatever I did would be up to me, and if it didn’t work, I might drastically alter the timeline and end up forgetting all over again.

I began reaching for Realmheart again, more as a meditative practice than any expectation that I would actually make the connection. It was like trying to curl the fingers of a hand that was no longer attached to my body. Sylvie and I remained there for what felt like hours to my disconnected brain and body, but I was certain that my mother would have come to check on me if that were the case.

Pudgy fingers raised to dig into my bare sternum.

I scrunched up my face and scratched more vigorously. There was an itch deep inside my chest that I couldn’t seem to reach.

My vision flickered, and for a moment Sylvie lit up like an old Earth Christmas tree, her body made of light, both mana and aether.

The sudden change made me flinch, and it blinked away.

‘What was that?’ Sylvie asked, looking at me with a mixture of concern and excitement. *‘Do it again.’*

I looked at her and tried to unfocus my eyes, to cross them, to stare so hard that the lights would appear again. When they didn’t, I closed my eyes entirely, clenching my little fists and straining to reach that mindset that had just flickered past me like a moth in the dark.

There was a sudden rumble, and the room filled with an embarrassing smell. I grimaced, and my mother reappeared to clean and change me. I endured the experience, afraid to slip free of the bonds of that moment.

When she was done, instead of leaving me to my business, she carried me out of the room on her hip, bouncing me and singing softly.

I was so close, I grumbled to Sylvie, who walked patiently along at Mother's side. My fingers dug into my sternum again.

"Do you have an itchy, Art?" Mom asked suddenly, holding me up for inspection. Her fingers brushed the spot with a soft humming noise. "I don't see anything, but…" Her fingers sparkled with magic, and I felt the soothing mana move through me. Although it wiped away the ache in my legs and backside from sitting so still for so long, it only highlighted the strange itch I felt in my—

My core! I squirmed, and my speech came out as a burbling coo.

"Art, what—oh!"

I had shaken free of Mother and pattered away in my toddler style, doing my best version of a run back to the bedroom.

"Okay then, I can take a hint," my mother said with mild sarcastic amusement as I crawled off.

Plopping back down, I turned my focus inward as best I could. Closing my eyes, I again reached for Realmheart.

The itching sensation grew more pronounced.

I felt a lopsided grin tremble across my face. *My core, Sylv. I can feel my* actual *core. That damned itch…I can feel it.*

Following the uncomfortable sensation like a beacon, my keystone-bound consciousness reached for my physical body.

Although my eyes were closed, the air within the bedroom grew warm with the sudden glow of atmospheric mana and aether.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and gaped at the motes of red, yellow, blue, green, and purple that swam all around me. I took a deep breath, and a little shudder ran down my spine. With Realmheart active, I simply sat and stared. It was beautiful, and it changed everything.

I quickly began to feel tired, so I released my connection to the godrune. The floating mana particles faded away, leaving only the purple motes of aether. After another few seconds, they too vanished. Despite this fatigue, I wasn't discouraged. In fact, I was exhilarated.

I have an idea.

Despite spending most of my conscious time living in the present moment, the next couple of months seemed to fly by in a blur. With the ghostly version of Sylvie at my side, I practiced connecting to and activating Realmheart, Aroa's Requiem, and King's Gambit. While Realmheart seemed to work more or less as expected, I couldn't utilize Aroa's Requiem to repair a broken item as I could in the real world. King's Gambit served more to muddle my thoughts than to clarify them, and I had yet to duplicate the effect of splitting my mind and considering many possibilities at once. I suspected that it was due to my inability to manipulate aether inside the keystone.

Still, Sylvie and I had a plan that we were confident in.

The day of my awakening arrived at last. I began my meditation as usual, slowly condensing all the mana within my body to my sternum. Sylvie floated within me, hovering at the center of that spot like Regis so often did. She was silent, but her thoughts were hyper-focused on the real Sylvie's slumbering mind. Despite being asleep, her connection to me remained.

Which meant that there were two halves of Sylvie's whole present inside of me.

It's beginning, I projected to Sylvie. *Hold on, it might get a bit bumpy in there.*

Using the itch in my core as a tether back to my body as I'd done before, I activated Aroa's Requiem and focused on the ghost Sylvie. At the same time, I opened my mind to the real Sylvie, reaching through our link to give her a strong mental shake. Or trying to, at least. I couldn't be certain if I was successful.

A powerful pushing force erupted out of me as my core formed and I awakened. Closing my eyes, I channeled Aroa's Requiem into Sylvie,

willing her to be whole and complete again. I projected my desire and request to the aether I knew was gathering around our home to watch the explosion unfold, drawn by some unknown twist of Fate. I couldn't manipulate it the way I did my own purified aether, but if I was right…

In a kind of echo of my condensing mana, the atmospheric aether also gravitated toward me, through me. Within the pushing force, within my body, within the core that was rapidly forming out of the explosion that leveled our house, the violet motes shimmered and danced around the ghostly manifestation of Sylvie. The force of my awakening rippled outward not only in the keystone space, but it also vibrated through my physical body and the connections I had with my companions.

Somewhere outside of myself, I felt Sylvie's eyes snap open.

Her ghostly form spilled out of me, transparent golden eyes wide as she spun around. Momentarily untethered from reality and uncertain what was happening, her thoughts snapped and sparked across the surface of my mind like the scales of the lightning drake. There was a liquid texture to her transparent body as she seemed to shift and reform, aging and then de-aging rapidly as she vacillated between the younger, pre-rebirth version of herself and the slightly older Sylvie I was familiar with over these last many months.

Sylvie, you're all right. Don't worry, you're just waking up.

My bond gazed down at her incorporeal body, let out a scream only I could hear, then swelled outward, bursting into the form of a dragon. Her broad, black-scaled chest rose and fell heavily, and her long neck twisted back and forth, scanning the environment. Had her very real fear not been pumping directly into me, the sight of this huge, transparent dragon flailing around while my mother and father tended to me none the wiser would have almost been humorous.

It wasn't until Mom and Dad began taking me out of the rubble of our home that Sylvie seemed to focus, her head snapping down and her eyes fixating on them as if they were a lighthouse seen through a long-fought storm.

Grabbing onto that attention, I tried to reach her again. *Sylvie, it's going to be okay. It's me, Arthur. I've managed to wake you up and…bind you to the*

ghost of your past self. I struggled to put the strange thought into real words I knew she would understand. *We're in the fourth keystone. And I need you.*

Despite being able to see through them, I held her golden eyes. The huffing and puffing of her massive body slowed. One tentative footstep after another, she followed where Mother and Father carried me, their conversation meaningless background noise at this point. Her huge, clawed limbs left no prints in the wreckage of the home as she passed.

'Arthur?'

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. *It worked.*

Sylvie opened her mouth to speak, but I held her mind and focused on the memories of everything that had transpired in the keystone so far. It took time for Sylvie to work her way through the shared visions, but I didn't rush her. Instead, we sat with my mother in the shade of a small tree as Father inspected the ruins and spoke to a neighbor, who had come running at the noise.

Finally, Sylvie's focus returned to the present. She had shrunk back into her humanoid form and now regarded me with disbelief. *'I saw some of what was happening, like I was dreaming. This is all…'* She trailed off with a shake of her head. Sylvie watched my mother slowly brushing her fingers through my hair for a minute or two, then continued. *'I'm sorry, Arthur. I'm so sorry. The things you've had to endure here…it's sick.'*

I think you get out of it what you bring into it, I answered, watching Father pick through the rubble without truly seeing. *The lives I lived here were the direct result of my own choices. Deviating from the experiences of my real life nearly always ends up resulting in…*

I stopped, frowning, as a new thought came to me. Almost tentatively, I again followed the distant itch back to my physical body and activated Realmheart. While there was no physical manifestation of the godrune activating on my toddler body, aether and mana swam into my vision.

A fiery claw squeezed my heart, which began to beat rapidly.

Among the familiar colors that I expected to see, something else lit up under the influence of Realmheart.

‘What is that?’ Sylvie asked, sharing my vision through our mental connection.

There was a nimbus of golden light radiating from the house. Thin golden threads seemed to connect the demolished house, me, my parents, and places that weren’t places, but rather times, both forward into the future and back into the past.

Fate, I thought breathlessly. *This has to be Fate.*

The gears of my mind spun as I tried to determine what had changed, what catalyst had allowed me to suddenly see this manifestation. Was it Realmheart, or Sylvie’s awakening in conjunction with my own, or some more subtle insight I’d gained that expanded on the properties of my abilities?

Curious, I released Realmheart. Again, the visible mana particles vanished instantly, while the aether lingered and faded more slowly. The golden threads remained longer—so long in fact that I began to think it may not be related to Realmheart at all—before the threads finally began to dim and go out, leaving ghostly little afterimages in my eyes. Eventually, even the afterimages melted away.

‘If this is Fate, then perhaps you can see it now because it has decided you can?’ Sylvie asked haltingly.

You think that Fate might be…conscious? Aware?

Sylvie blinked, nonplussed. *‘I hadn’t really meant it that way, but…it’s possible, isn’t it? Aether has a kind of consciousness, after all. Would Fate not also, if it is an aspect of aether? So far, it seems as if the lesson you’ve learned about your life—your ‘fate’—is that you already lived through the best-case scenario. After all, you said yourself that every time you’ve changed something, it has resulted in a worse series of events.’*

And you think that the keystone, or Fate, or the djinn—whatever is driving this sequence of events—is trying to show me that things have unfolded this way for a reason?’

Sylvie shrugged her incorporeal shoulders. *‘I wouldn’t dare to hope it’s that simple, and it does seem to fly in the face of your living through life exactly*

as you already had, since that resulted only in a sort of time loop…but as for why you can suddenly see these golden threads connecting moment to moment of your life, if this understanding is putting you on the right track, then you've gained some insight that Fate wants you to have.'

I nodded along slowly. What she said made sense, but it was also very disconnected from how I thought about mana, aether, insight, and even the previous suppositions I'd made about the aspect of Fate itself, and I found it difficult to fix this new paradigm in my mind.

'Why don't we continue forward?' Sylvie suggested. *'We can check other points in your life for these trails or threads as well. Maybe we can confirm more about it or unlock some new insight.'*

We don't know if you can travel along the timeline with me, I pointed out. *If I retract my mind and allow events to proceed forward, you may be drawn away on the path you originally took during this time.*

'Then I will see you at my birth,' Sylvie answered with a wry smile.

I squirmed in Mother's arms, and she let me scramble free. With one last concerned look, she stood and returned to my father.

I sat on my knees beside Sylvie. *'Enter my body. Just guesswork, but maybe it will shield you or keep us together.'*

She did, and I pulled back from the world, letting time rush by.

Are you still with me? I asked.

'I am,' Sylvie confirmed, and I felt relief wash through me.

Progress. We were making progress.

I plunged back into the rapidly passing time as we once again approached the mountain pass where the attack happened and I was separated from my family. I found myself sitting in the cart with my mother, who was watching the scenery pass while chatting with Angela Rose and paying me no mind.

With the itch in my real core as a guide, I reached for my physical body and focused on the Realmheart godrune.

As expected, the world lit up with particles of aether and mana. And running through them, a thin thread of golden light, leading onward to the site of the ambush and the cliff. Thinner, fainter threads ran back from the glowing aura around the mountainside to each of us, as well as the hidden bandits. Pieces were clicking into place.

“Stop,” I said, my small voice commanding.

Durden pulled the reins, bringing our cart to a halt. The adults all looked at me with surprise.

‘What are you doing?’ Sylvie asked, then, *‘Oh!’* as my thoughts passed to her.

“There is an ambush ahead,” I continued, explaining to the Twin Horns and my parents what was going to happen. As they hurried into position to counter the bandits, I released Realmheart and activated Aroa’s Requiem.

This time, although the mana and aether particles faded out of view, the golden lines remained.

I reached out and took the golden thread leading away from the battle in my fingers and gave it a small tug. The world around me rushed by, only it was moving in reverse. That small tug took me back a few minutes. When I released it, the cart was again moving forward, my mother still seated beside me chatting with Angela Rose, paying me no mind. The point where I’d stopped the cart passed, and we rolled forward toward the fight that separated me from my family.

Activating Aroa’s Requiem again, I pulled the thread forward.

The fight rushed by me as if time were sped up, but it was different than when I disassociated from my body and stepped away, letting life play out as it had happened without conscious effort or interference. This speeding up of events felt more intentional, with my mind and location both staying relevant to my place in time. Events still played out the same way, but there seemed to be no risk of me being caught up in the rushing tide of time and the vortex effect I had encountered before.

Even as I plummeted off the cliffside yet again, I grinned.

Everything was starting to make sense.

I hurried forward to Sylvia's cave. It was another point in time marked with the golden aura of Fate, which was no surprise.

'I can feel the egg pulling me in,' Sylvie said as we descended into the cave where I would meet my Grandma Sylvia—and Sylvie her mother—for the first time.

It's fine, go to it. I'll see you on the other side.

Despite my curiosity about using Realmheart and Aroa's Requiem to explore the different potential outcomes of my time with Sylvia, there was something else more immediate that I wanted to accomplish. Sylvie was reborn as herself, and as I had hoped, the real Sylvie's mind remained awake and conscious inside of her newborn body.

We sped forward, examining each major turning point in my life, unsurprised to find they were all marked by Fate. It was as Windsom transported us to Epheotus for the first time that I was brought up by an unexpected and rather uncomfortable thought.

All of these moments marked by Fate…were they destined to happen that way? Did Fate make these moments happen?

Hearing my thoughts and understanding the underlying context, Sylvie's tone was consoling when she answered. *'You made these choices, Arthur. You know that. No one was pulling the strings making these things happen.'*

Still, I could feel her lack of surety, only partially veiled from our connection. *There were so many places where it could go wrong. Even when I have made better choices in the keystone, the result has always been my premature death. What if…Fate is prioritizing* my *survival over the good of the world?*

'Or,' Sylvie began, her tone that of someone explaining something very simple to someone very dense, *'your survival* is *what is best for this world. But I think I have to point out that this keystone and the events it creates aren't real. How could it know what would have happened in every given scenario?'*

Fate, I reminded her.

“Arthur, Lady Sylvie. I must insist we continue on,” Windsom said, turning to look at us against the backdrop of the many-colored bridge, Kezess’s castle, and the twin peaks of Mount Geolus, swallowed by an endless expanse of fog.

Activating Aroa’s Requiem, I sped forward through the bulk of my training until I reached a specific point.

“The fact is that you’re a walking collection of statistical improbabilities,” Wren said, looking at me with clear exasperation. “You have an innate ability to comprehend the workings of the four main elements, as well as some of their deviating elemental forms, coinciding so neatly with the fact that comprehension of all four elements is necessary to unlock the mysteries of aether, which the very princess of dragons just so happens to have kindly bestowed upon you. Everything about you is an outlier, boy. Even asuras don’t have that much innate talent and luck.”

“If that’s your way of cheering me up, thank you,” I chuckled, getting to my feet. “Now, what’s next on our to-do list?”

“Before that, give me your dominant hand.” Wren rose from his conjured earthen throne and approached me.

Spreading out my right hand, palm facing up, I stared at the asura, waiting in anticipation. The next step was one I was less certain of than the previous revelations regarding Aroa’s Requiem and Realmheart, or even of combining Sylvie with her keystone-ghost self.

Wren pulled a fist-sized black case from his coat pocket, then opened it and removed a small pyramidal opaque gem. “This is a mineral called acclorite. By itself, it’s a rather rare but useless piece of rock. However, with the right refining and synthesizing process—which I will keep unto my grave, so don’t bother asking—it is capable of something remarkable.”

“Like forming a weapon. Or even, in the right circumstances, a living being,” I replied.

Wren’s brows rose up into his unkempt hairline, and he regarded me with undisguised astonishment. “So someone has been spilling secrets before

their due time, I see," he said after a moment, recovering and glancing around sourly as if he would find the guilty party hiding behind a rock. "How unprofessional."

"I'm going to tell you something, and you don't have any choice other than to believe me," I started, having already confirmed that this was one of those moments marked by Fate. I took confidence from the knowledge that I could simply reverse course and attempt this again if I failed.

Wren made a face, but I pushed on. "Although it takes much more than a year, this acclorite does in fact grow into a weapon: a conscious being combining aspects of Sylvia, Sylvie, myself, and a Vritra retainer named Uto."

Wren's mouth curved into a wry smile as if he thought I were teasing him.

"Listen, Wren. This being is born in a place called the Relictombs—the system of dungeons or 'chapters' created by the djinn, and so he is able to feed on and utilize aether. Some part of that being's consciousness—his name is Regis—is currently sleeping within me—kind of, except my body is…outside of this space and time—and I need to wake him up. I think this acclorite is the key to doing that."

Wren's smirk had slowly slipped off his face. He was frowning at me as if I were delirious or worse. "How could you know any of this, boy? The elven seer? Even if she'd shared some kind of vision with you, how would the—"

"It's more complicated than that," I interrupted, drawing a scowl from my tutor. "Suffice it to say that I know with utmost certainty that the consciousness that will grow out of this acclorite is here, now, with us. Sleeping. I want you to help me bind the mind back to the stone and awaken Regis early."

Something clicked into place in Wren's expression. It wasn't belief, really, but more like…intrigue, and a very real willingness to explore this possibility further. "What are you suggesting?"

"First, set the acclorite under my skin," I said, holding my hand out again.

Wren let out a long breath, then took hold of my hand and began pressing the opaque gem into my palm. I hardly registered the pain, and soon enough

the acclorite disappeared underneath my skin.

I flexed my hand a couple of times, staring at my palm. Nothing happened.

“Now what?” Wren asked.

“This is your area of expertise. How could this rock turn into a conscious, living creature?”

“It’s rare,” Wren answered. He, too, was staring at my hand. “With suitable focus, determination, and input of energy, a weapon grown from acclorite will contain some measure of self-determination. This is born of the wielder, and fully binds a weapon to its user. But for the acclorite to grow into a fully self-aware, conscious being, this transfer of energy must be matched by an incredible will and, usually, a significant amount of desperation. Your state of being when the weapon manifested plays an essential role, as do the source and variety of inputs prior to manifestation.”

I smiled in amusement, recognizing Wren’s words here as an echo of what he’d said when he discovered Regis was a conscious manifestation in my real life. “And something of the acclorite remains, though. You said…well, never mind, but if Regis were here in body, you would be able to sense the acclorite’s energy, right?”

Wren rested his hands on his hips and tapped his fingers rapidly. “I would. A being born of acclorite is mutable in nature, but the signature of its origin should be perceptible even if it were present only in a disembodied form. Unless that form was shrouded inside the body of another living being, where its own signature would be disguised by the mana and natural rhythm of the host—the heartbeat, breathing, circulation from core to channels, et cetera. This may be made yet more complicated if the being is—how did you put it?—outside space and time, whatever that means.”

“But if you knew it was there, and the host in question allowed you, could you find that sleeping mind?”

Wren regarded me as if I had completely lost my own mind. “I won’t pretend to even fully understand what that means, but…” His eyes narrowed, and he mussed his already tangled hair. With a scoff, he waved a hand and conjured a flat bed of rock, indicating I should lie down. I did so,

and he stood over me. “Close your eyes and stop the noisy gears of your senseless brain from spinning so I can focus.”

I bit back a sarcastic retort and tried to do as he ordered, letting my mind still and go blank. My breathing slowed, as did my pulse. Calling back on multiple lifetimes of practice, I fell into a meditative blankness.

Wren’s hands passed over me. I could sense them, but I didn’t focus on them. He hummed thoughtfully, then let out an irritated huff, his warm breath washing across my face. Then, after what felt like a very long time, “Aha…”

Physical fingers pressed down over my sternum, and fingers of magic probed deeper, wriggling through flesh and meat and even deeper than my core into something ethereal and intrinsic to my being—the nexus of where my waking consciousness in the keystone met my physical body outside of it. I focused on the weak sense I had of Regis’s sleeping mind, which I felt even in that first moment after appearing inside the keystone, and hoped that the spotlight of my thoughts would point Wren in the right direction.

“Stop that, boy. Just lie there and act like the braindead loon you are. I take back every positive thing I’ve ever said about you. There’s no way you are anything but a complete and utter kook—” He cut off with a sharp inhalation, and I felt the incorporeal fingers close around something. “By the ancients, you are right. An acclorite-born being…I can feel it tethered to you—no, woven into and through you, as tied to you as your own nervous system…”

A warm, familiar energy floated up from my sternum through my chest and into my arm, then down the arm to my hand, guided by Wren’s magic. He snorted with delight. “I’ve never rehomed a consciousness that already exists into an acclorite crystal before. It shouldn’t work, but if you’re right and this…Regis…was really born from *this* acclorite…” The acclorite burned hot as molten iron in my palm, and I gasped at the pain. Wren grabbed my wrist, pinning my arm to the stone.

Purple light glowed through my skin, which felt like it would burn away at any moment.

‘Arthur, what’s wrong? What’s happening?’ Sylvie’s voice sounded in my mind from where she still trained with her grandfather in Castle Indrath.

My eyes rolled back into my head as my body bucked. A powerful hand pressed against my chest, holding me flat and preventing me from hurting myself. Not that I could have felt it past the agony of the acclorite.

A black will-o-wisp the size of my clenched fist floated free of my flesh, and the pain vanished. I sank back, no longer bucking against Wren’s arms, sweat pouring from my face and my breath coming in desperate gasps. I just barely made out the ball of dark light, within which two bright sparks glinted like eyes and a black slash below them looked like a wry smile.

I had no breath to speak, no focus to generate words. Even my mind seemed clouded, and I couldn’t sense the thoughts of either Regis or Sylvie.

The will-o-wisp darted closer to me and dipped low.

“Behold, master. I, Regis, the mighty weapon gifted to you by the asuras so long ago, have finally manifested in all my glory!” The two bright sparks glinted as if they were blinking, and the wisp turned slowly around in a circle. “Wait, what the hell is going on?”

49

JI-AE

TESSIA ERALITH

As the portal swallowed us, my last thought was of disappointment. For a moment, it had felt so good to see Arthur, but that feeling crumbled with the stone structure of his golem's body.

Space and time inverted, stretched out and flipped upside down by the portal as it dragged us away, and then…

And then I was surrounded by nothing. Absolutely nothing. Emptiness in every direction.

And I was alone.

I was *alone*.

I couldn't sense Cecilia or hear her thoughts. Nor could I feel the body that I now shared with her.

Tentatively, I tried to speak her name, but no sound came out. I had no fingers or toes to wiggle, no neck to turn my gaze left or right.

Then, like I was stepping out of a thick black fog, space materialized in front of me.

I was looking across ground made of black glass at Cecilia. Not Cecilia in my body, but the way she pictured herself in her head, an athletic and feminine figure with cream-colored skin and dusty brown hair tied up in a tail. Beyond the strangeness of looking at her in a way I had only seen in thought before, something else was wrong. She was flat, like a reflection of herself in a dark mirror, and she was very still, making only occasional, unnaturally jerky movements.

“What’s happening?” I asked. My voice came out distorted and strange to my own ears.

Across from me, Cecilia’s face pinched into a scowl. *‘I should’ve known you would attack me as soon as you had the chance.’* Her voice resounded hostilely inside my mind.

I shook my head. *I wasn’t exactly hiding that fact. Whatever delusions or reasons you have to act the way you do, that applies to me too. But that's not important right now, is it? Look around us. Where are we?*

‘Maybe it’s a blessing in disguise. When I escape this, whatever it is, I’m going to leave you here.’ In her frame, Cecilia’s hands came up, and it looked as if she were pushing against the surface of a flat piece of glass.

Muted as my senses were, my nerves were still on fire throughout my body as I considered the full implications of what Cecilia and I were experiencing. We had fallen through a portal and been transported somewhere, but more than that, we had somehow been separated from one another and imprisoned. *How is Arthur capable of this?*

‘Oh, Vritra take me,’ Cecilia cursed, letting her hands drop. *‘I can’t believe I fell for his trap. I…Agrona is going to be furious. Not only did I disobey him, but I failed as well.’*

I felt myself frown in a distant, numb sort of way. *Surely you’re more angry at Arthur for trapping you than you are afraid of Agrona?*

When Cecilia looked across the emptiness at me, I could see I was wrong. Her emotions were distant and clouded, but the expression on her face was easily readable. *‘You don’t understand. He’s losing patience with me. I’ve sensed it. And I’m afraid that…he’ll do something to Nico to punish me.’*

She turned left and right, up and down as she searched her prison for any hint of a way out. *‘I need to escape this place.’*

Cecilia’s thought brought me up short, and I had to be careful not to send any more thoughts to her. I was scared, and I wanted to escape too, but… Arthur had done this on purpose, knowing Cecilia and I would both be trapped here.

I had to ask myself what Arthur’s intention was. I didn’t know where we were, what the purpose of this place was beyond the obvious, or what would happen if we remained. Arthur knew I was still conscious inside of my body along with Cecilia, or at least I thought he did. He would have expected me to be here. That could have been why he devised this prison to separate us. Perhaps that meant he would be coming to free me…but was he really capable of such powerful magic?

Fear turned my stomach. It was also possible that the separation of our minds had nothing to do with Arthur’s actual plan, and he had finally decided that removing Cecilia was worth sacrificing me in the gambit. I couldn’t bring myself to disagree with the sentiment or be angry at Arthur if this were the case, but I still felt afraid.

‘I can feel your mind whirring over there,’ Cecilia interjected, interrupting my thoughts. *‘It’s annoying. If you’re not going to help me figure out how to get out of this prison, the least you can do is shut up.’*

I sighed and wrapped my arms around myself. *I don’t know what this place is, but to be honest, I don’t really care. Arthur finally beat you, Cecilia. There is nowhere for you to go, nothing for you to do now. Sit and seethe in your silence and fear.*

I closed myself off to her before she could reply, lapsing into a sullen and fretful silence. But I still had to watch her; I couldn’t look anywhere else. And seeing her thrashing and gesticulating inside her two-dimensional prison brought me neither pleasure nor comfort. I expected her attempt to be short lived but was surprised as the tenacity of her efforts only built. No magic or spells manifested in the open air between us, but a charge built within the strange prison that made the hair on my neck stand on end and roughened my skin with gooseflesh.

A tremor ran from my toes up to my scalp, and something tugged me forward. I flowed through a thin layer of glassy energy and found myself standing on the smooth surface I had seen before. I spun around to see an identical window like the one Cecilia was still trapped inside. Her burning eyes stabbed into my back.

Beyond the window, around our smooth flat platform, which couldn't have been more than twenty feet wide, was an endless ocean of emptiness. It was so black that my eyes played tricks with me, inserting color in a haze of purple and shapes like shadowy creatures crawling over each other inside the dark and the void.

I turned away and hurried to the very center of the platform between the two windows, each labored breath aching in my chest. "What have you done, Arthur?"

As if from a great distance, Cecilia's muffled voice was shouting my name.

My hands trailed up my arms to my shoulders, then to my face, feeling the warmth of my skin, the shape of my nose, cheeks, and lips. *My hair*, I thought, running my fingers through it, lifting a lock of the silvery gray strands.

"Tessia!" Cecilia shouted again, her voice cutting through my revery like a bone saw.

I wrapped my arms around myself in a sort of hug, hunching over and closing my eyes. "Just…give me some time, please. Let me have this moment."

My legs were trembling, and I sank to the ground and pulled my knees to my chest. Pressing my face into my knees, I began to cry. My body shook with the relief of it. Slowly, I exercised the pent-up emotion of my long imprisonment, and the tears eased. My breath came easily. Every muscle in my body relaxed.

Cecilia cleared her throat. "How did you escape?"

"Imagine, the two of us fused together for so long," I said, my voice empty of all the emotion I had just released, "only to find ourselves imprisoned together when we are finally separated."

“Tessia, please…”

My gaze slowly lifted to meet Cecilia’s. I had spent so long now inside her thoughts that I knew her probably better than she knew herself. I’d seen her switch from megalomaniac to vulnerable girl like I might switch on and off a lighting artifact, but I also had to remind myself that she was a child who had been manipulated into being little more than a weapon, not once but through two different lives.

“I don’t know. I felt you pushing mana across this platform, and a charge built up inside my window, then suddenly I was drifting out—”

“That’s it!” Cecilia said desperately. “These windows or whatever must have to be opened with mana or—” Her face fell suddenly, growing pale with fear. “Or aether.”

I thought back to the moment Cecilia had used Arthur’s own weapon to strike a blow against him and went silent.

“If I moved enough mana, it is possible that some aether interacted with the window as well…but I can’t pull mana to me in here,” she continued softly.

I didn’t answer.

“Which means you would have to be the one to release me,” she finished after a few long seconds. “We have to work together. You’re going to have to let me back in.”

She was referring to the mental block I had placed shortly after arriving inside the zone, cutting her off while I was imprisoned inside the window. I’d left the barrier up, but now it slipped away, joining our minds yet again.

Cecilia’s tangle of emotions burned hot and uncomfortable, like an ache behind my eyes.

“Except there is one other problem,” I started, digging my fingers into my temple with a grimace. “Even if I wanted to release you—I don’t know if I do—I can’t control mana.” I could sense the mana contained within the strange prison, but although I had my body back, I hadn’t regained my ability to cast spells. I tried not to think about the fact that I didn’t have a core at all.

Cecilia didn’t respond immediately, but I could feel her thoughts turning over and over. I stepped away from her window, moving to the edge of the platform and staring out into the nothing beyond. The writhing shadows, black on black, made my skin crawl even as I wondered if it was real or if I was simply seeing things.

‘Why can we still hear each other’s thoughts?’ Cecilia asked, her voice seeping into my head unexpectedly.

I returned to her window. “I don’t know, but then, I can’t imagine what kind of magic could separate us to begin with.”

“What if we haven’t been separated?” she asked, her voice soft and echoing as if resounding up from the bottom of a well.

“What do you mean?”

She gestured at my torso from within the window. “You have your body, but I look like myself—like before, on Earth. And yet the runes that bound my reincarnated spirit to your body still mark your flesh. You are walking around inside an Integrated body and should be able to use magic, while I have a ki center and not a core, but I *can* manipulate mana.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise as I regarded her. “Of course. I should have seen that before. So you think…that we are still in the same body? Only our minds are divided?”

“I think we’re in the Relictombs,” she confirmed. “If there is anywhere that could trap our minds in a prison while our body sleeps somewhere else, that would be the answer.”

Cecilia had been taught about the Relictombs, although not extensively, and I shared her limited knowledge. Together, we considered what we knew. “That must have been an ascension portal that we fell through.”

Cecilia nodded at me from within her window. “Grey would only have chosen this zone if it was somewhere he thought we couldn’t escape.”

“Which means that it likely does require control over aether to navigate,” I said, circling back to our earlier line of thought. “So we really are stuck here.”

“No,” Cecilia said, now shaking her head. “I already released you. That means we *can* interact with this zone, even if not in the intended way. You can release me, and together we can clear this zone and find our way out.”

I bit my lip, unsure what to do. “Is this place any worse than out there, where I’ll be a prisoner in my own body again?”

“Please, Tessia,” Cecilia begged, sagging in her frame. “I can’t stay trapped in here. I *have* to get back to Agrona, to explain myself…” Her eyes burrowed into mine. “I can’t let him punish Nico for my mistakes.” When I didn’t immediately respond, she added, “I know you don’t understand why I do the things that I do, but…”

“I don’t, but I also can’t say I haven’t done something similar.” I swallowed down a lump in my throat, wondering at the simulation’s ability to create such a realistic sensation. *I chose to go to my parents that day, and Arthur and Sylvie almost died—no, in a sense, they did die—because of my decision.*

I knew that Arthur wanted to keep us—to keep Cecilia—in this place for as long as possible. Maybe he meant for her to stay here forever, or maybe he knew she would break free eventually. I could only hope that my actions were a part of his plan, because the more I thought, the more my mind felt made up.

“What do you want, Cecilia?” I asked. “Really? In the end, I mean.”

Cecilia let out a deep breath, her eyes never leaving mine. “I want it all to have been worth it. In the end.”

I held her gaze through the plane of the window. After all our time stuck together, I understood.

I didn’t know if she would be able to escape this place without my help. Perhaps, perhaps not.

But these last few weeks, Cecilia had been changing, beginning to falter in the flawed logic that kept her fighting for Agrona. Her fear that he would use Nico against her was driving a wedge between them, making him feel more like the cruel scientists and politicians she had died to escape from on Earth. I knew that Cecilia was mentally weak and existentially immature. It

was that, more than her power, that made her so dangerous. But, like a tornado, the danger she presented was to everyone equally, even her allies.

If Agrona harmed Nico, there was no telling what she might do.

But there was no way for Arthur to know any of this. From all he had seen, she was the dedicated, powerful, willing tool of Agrona. Arthur must think he has no choice but to eliminate or destroy her in the end.

I realized, then, that his reason for choosing this zone might have been because of me. Every time Cecilia had encountered him, he had noticeably vacillated between wanting Cecilia dead and holding back. *Instead of destroying her by sending her into the Relictombs, he only tried to imprison us. Because he hasn't given up yet.*

I realized I was holding my breath and released it in a gust. I hadn't given up yet, either. Cecilia was standing at the edge of a cliff, terrified that someone—Arthur, perhaps, or even Agrona—was going to push her off. If I could be there to hold out a hand for her to grab, to provide a lifeline that she could trust…

I let out a shaky sigh. I could only hope this decision wouldn't be one I would regret. "You're going to have to give me control and…to teach me how to use magic without a core."

What followed was a difficult back and forth as Cecilia and I both worked against our instincts. If we were right, the zone was a kind of projection, little more than a dream, and for Cecilia to release her hold over my body and allow me to manipulate the mana within the dream, we both had to accept that the zone was simultaneously not populated by our real selves while also allowing our real shared body—and magical ability—to be utilized by both of us at the same time.

It would have been far easier to simply wake up, but whatever magic formed the zone and held us within it wasn't so easily beaten. Still, I had been right beside Cecilia for all of her many advances in mana manipulation, and the pain that I had been subjected to was not without some benefit.

Day after day passed us by as I sat in front of Cecilia's mirror and sought for the magic. Despite the passing time, Cecilia seemed to calm as she stepped into the role of guide and teacher, simultaneously handing me the reins of our detached physical body while guiding me toward the magic and teaching me how to manipulate it without the lens of a core to focus through.

I followed her impromptu exercises with a singular focus, and we both embraced the trial and error necessary to impart her insight and understanding.

"Okay, that's not working, but I think we can change tactics slightly," Cecilia said after one of many failed efforts. "I can sense the mana reacting to your focus, but you're not taking hold of it, at least not yet. What?" She looked at me with her brows pinched in confusion.

I realized I was smiling and quickly smoothed my features. "Nothing, it's just…you seem so motivated. Almost like you're having fun."

"I…" she started before trailing off. "I guess it's just nice to be working together for a change."

I nodded, understanding what she meant. "We're almost there, I can feel it."

It was difficult to describe, but it felt like there was a scale inside me, and that scale was tipping slowly, lifting me up and bringing me into balance with the opposing force—Cecilia. And as that scale balanced, my sense of the mana drifting around us heightened until I could feel it like something brushing across the tips of my reaching fingers.

And then, finally, my fingers closed around what I'd been grasping for.

I drew in a sudden, shivering breath, and my hands clenched into fists. The mana particles lit up in my vision the way Cecilia could see it. The particles were sparse, floating over the platform but not suffusing the void beyond.

"See how the mana moves?" Cecilia used our mental connection to draw my focus to a specific point. There was a sort of tension in the suspended mana particles. "This place is much thicker with aether, and that tension is the two forces pressing against each other. If you force all the mana toward

my window, you can’t help but move some aether too. That has to be how I released you, I think.”

I stood and took a few steps back, working to slow and steady my breathing, which was threatening to run out of control as the flush of success and the joy of controlling the mana washed over me. My concentration tightened on the mana, taking hold of it particle by particle but not yet enacting my will. I tried to visualize all the aether particles that were filling the gaps between the reds, yellows, greens, and blues. The thought that Arthur must be able to see the entire picture flitted into my head, and thinking of him helped to steady me and give me confidence.

‘Now push with all your might,’ Cecilia ordered.

I hesitated.

“What are you waiting for?” Cecilia asked, a hint of her desperation leaking back into her demeanor.

“If I help us get out of here, you owe me one,” I said, watching her carefully. “As long as it is in your ability, I need you to promise that you’ll do one favor for me in the future.”

Now Cecilia was the one to hesitate, her jaw working silently in the window, her thoughts shrouded momentarily. “I promise.”

Letting out a deep breath, I pushed.

The flat plane of the window containing Cecilia rippled, and she drifted out onto the platform. Behind her, the mana I had projected spilled out into the void and was swallowed by the darkness.

Cecilia looked down at her hands, then spun in a circle, her eyes wide as she gazed around.

I smiled, but almost immediately the expression faltered as a sleepy fatigue gripped me. I stumbled suddenly. Cecilia’s eyes widened with surprise, and she grabbed me to keep me from falling. Her worried face grew blurry as the dark void behind her pulsed, fading in and out.

I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, I saw only a flash of darkness and claws. Closed again, then open—a waterfall in the distance, sparkling under a red sun—a blink, and howling, explosions of mana, monsters falling beneath a wave of spells…

Pain leaked through the fugue state, and I came to, realizing Cecilia was marching quickly through the halls of Taegrin Caelum. *What happened?*

‘You’re awake again,’ Cecilia replied. *‘I thought maybe that zone had done something. Destroyed your mind.’* There was a hint of relief in her words that surprised me. *‘I had to fight my way through a handful of zones to escape the Relictombs, but we’ve made it back to the fortress. I’m on my way to report to Agrona now.’*

Weakly, I considered just what sort of horrific trials the Relictombs must have conjured for someone of Cecilia’s strength. By the way she was limping and favoring a number of still-healing wounds, her struggle was clear.

Cecilia’s tension rose with each step as we hurried through the fortress toward Agrona’s private wing. The doors were open when we arrived. I could feel Agrona’s presence emanating outward from deeper inside his chambers, and Cecilia followed that aura like a beacon.

We found him waiting on one of the many balconies overlooking one of the central courtyards of the sprawling mountain fortress. He made a show of reading a scroll that he had stretched out in front of him, not immediately taking notice of us. A minute passed, then two, and Cecilia became almost physically ill as she waited to be acknowledged, standing within the frame of the open glass doors to the balcony.

Finally, Agrona rolled up the scroll before tossing it over the intricate railing. It caught fire as it fell, disintegrating into ash and smoke. Only then did he turn. Dark fire smoldered in his eyes, and his body language and expression were both stiff.

“Cecilia. You return. I hope you do so with an exceedingly interesting tale to tell,” he said, his voice a threatening baritone rumble.

Speaking in a rush, Cecilia began to explain what had happened. She rambled, speaking too quickly but without enough detail, rehashing her journey out of the Beast Glades and her battle against the asura, then giving a spotty explanation of the trap we had found ourselves in. She kept jumping back to details she had omitted earlier, making her explanation difficult for even me to follow, and I had been there.

Agrona's eyes never left us, and the longer Cecilia talked, the more agitated his aura became.

"I'm sorry," Cecilia finished, going to one knee and bowing in front of him. "Please forgive me, High Sovereign. I made a terrible mistake in judgment."

I watched from the prison of my own body as Agrona stepped forward. When he spoke, there was a biting edge of poorly concealed sarcasm laced through with disappointment. "I have overestimated your maturity, Cecilia. If this had been a test, I would say that you failed spectacularly." His jaw worked silently for a moment. "And yet perhaps I have also underestimated the way in which Arthur Leywin affects those around him, including you." There was a ripple like heat waves in the air around Agrona. "It isn't the man's personal strength that changes the balance of power. Rather, it is the way the world reacts to him."

Agrona gave a small shake of his head, and I realized that, as angry as he was, some of that anger was turned toward himself. "I see my mistake clearly now. Thankfully, the dragons continue to fall into line just as expected, so I can afford to turn more of my resources to locating Arthur. What you've told me aligns with the reports I have received; Arthur has been very thorough in his attempt to avoid my countermeasures. But the time for play and experimentation is over. At this point, there is no other choice but to take care of things myself."

Cecilia rose smoothly, but she was trembling as we followed Agrona, who led us down into the reliquary Cecilia had visited previously.

What does he mean, take care of things himself? I asked, but the question bounced right off of Cecilia, whose own agitated thoughts were a chaotic muddle.

Agrona took us on a winding course through the reliquary halls to a door that was different from all the rest. Powerful enchantments emanated from it, and the dark gray metal surface was covered with geometric patterns, which upon closer inspection revealed themselves to be row after row of small, tightly arranged runes.

A black crystal was affixed to the wall beside the door by a bronze fixture. Agrona placed his hand on the crystal, and it glowed with white light through the black. Several locks released, and the door swung open on its own.

The room beyond was larger than those Cecilia had looked into before, including the room where she'd discovered the strange rune-covered table. The interior walls shimmered with a mana barrier that encompassed the entire chamber. A large pedestal dominated the floor, nearly filling the room. The pedestal itself stood ten feet high but was made even larger by a series of glowing stone rings that gyrated smoothly around the pedestal, somehow without striking each other. Indecipherable runes covered both the pedestal and the rings.

Above the pedestal, in the middle of the stone rings, there was a glowing lavender crystal. It pulsed slightly as we entered.

"Cecilia, meet Ji-ae," Agrona said, extending one arm toward the artifact.

Cecilia walked slowly around the platform, careful to stay outside of the arc of the gyrating rings. *'What is this? He said that as if this was a—'*

The crystal pulsed brighter, and a rich feminine voice with a strange accent vibrated sourcelessly through the air. "A pleasure to meet you, Legacy. Your presence here is the culmination of many djinn lifetimes of theoretical aetheric study. Quite amazing, really." The voice grew sharp with excitement as it spoke, almost gushing by the end.

What does that mean? I wondered, but Cecilia either ignored or didn't notice my thoughts. Her own mind had only grown more clouded and confused.

"Ji-ae, have your power levels evened out after the brief interruption to the Relictombs?" Agrona asked, speaking to the crystal as if it were a trusted

companion.

“I’m still recovering, unfortunately,” the voice answered. As if to demonstrate this fact, the crystal flickered feebly. “I expect it will take another twelve days or so to fully replenish my reserves of aetheric storage and return to normal operating levels.”

Cecilia had stopped walking and was now staring through the gyrating rings at Agrona, who was leaning against one wall and absently clinking one of the ornaments dangling from his horns. “What is this?”

Agrona’s expression was unreadable, but he kept his eyes on the crystal as he said, “Ji-ae was one of the djinn—a genius, even among her people. Her mind was stored in this housing, which was connected into the first level of the Relictombs as a kind of index for all the knowledge that lay within.”

What? I thought. At the same time, Cecilia asked, “What?”

Agrona raised one brow as he regarded Cecilia, making her shrink back into herself. “I have never shown her to anyone before. In fact, I’ve never even told anyone of her existence. You are the first—and the only—person I will tell.”

“Why?” Cecilia asked.

“Because I need you to understand,” Agrona answered stiffly. Still, there was a softness in his gaze that felt out of place. *Is that…sadness? Hurt?* “I feel it, Cecil. The tension that has been building between us. The distrust. Grey’s gravity pulls at you. The little voice in your ear manipulates you. Even Nico’s weakness infects you, making you doubt yourself and, by extension, me. After everything, what cuts deepest is that you still chose not to trust in me when you disobeyed a direct order and abandoned your post and your soldiers.”

Cecilia swallowed, an existential quiver running from the base of her skull all the way down to her toes.

I wanted to reach out to her, to support her and make her understand that he was manipulating her…but as she looked into his eyes, I couldn’t help but wonder. Was the emotion he felt genuine? Was this a crack in Agrona’s shield or a carefully portrayed facade of anger and hurt?

Sensing my attention on her, Cecilia preempted any argument I might have made, thinking, *‘Don’t. Let me think for myself, Tessia. Please, just…don’t.’*

I considered the promise she had made me, wondering if I could force her to listen by calling on it, but I knew instantly that I couldn’t put words to the fear and distrust in my heart. I would only drive her away by pushing too hard here. I bit my metaphysical tongue, withdrawing deeper into myself and carefully watching the situation play out.

“Go on,” Cecilia said, stiffly walking back around the platform so she could see Agrona clearly.

“I have learned much thanks to Ji-ae here,” Agrona continued, his voice soft. “The mystery of the djinn spellforms, the presence of the ruins, even reincarnation. My genius allowed for the implementation of the djinn’s stored knowledge, but it all would have been much more difficult had Ji-ae not been both able and eager to share this information with me.”

Cecilia waited, her mind latching onto a specific question she wanted him to answer, but she didn’t dare ask.

Agrona pushed away from the wall and approached Cecilia. “And with that same djinn knowledge, she is why I will be able to send you home to a new life, just as you wish.” His eyes narrowed, and his demeanor hardened. “When our work together is finished, of course.”

Cecilia’s jaw worked back and forth as she mustered the courage to ask. I resisted the impulse to urge her on. “And after my Integration? Those mages, the runes and table…there was more to all that than simply making sure I survived, wasn’t there?”

“There was,” Agrona answered simply. “Seris triggered the Integration too quickly, and it was possible that this fragile elven body wasn’t strong enough to cope with it. I prepared the ability to transfer some portion of the Legacy’s potential to myself.” He met Cecilia’s eyes unflinchingly. “This is a war. In the event something happened to you, I couldn’t in good conscience fail to prepare a contingency, or several even.”

Cecilia’s teeth ground together, but I could feel his words swaying her.

Agrona seemed to roll some unspoken word around in his mouth before turning suddenly back to the djinn artifact. “Ji-ae. I need to find Arthur Leywin. He has been in the Relictombs and visited the other ruins. He will project a strong signal of aether, and he has multiple spellforms. He should not be difficult to trace with so many of my people in Dicathen to cast the net.”

“I’m not sure if I have enough power, Agrona, but I will try,” the feminine voice said, emanating from the air around us.

“Cast the net?” Cecilia repeated, her own attention turning sluggishly to the glowing crystal and the gyrating rings.

Agrona gave her a self-satisfied smirk, the earlier tension easing. “Part of the function of the runes I developed from the ancient djinn spellforms, the runes imprinted on every adorned Alacryan, is provide a point from which Ji-ae can gather information.”

Cecilia blinked with quiet awe. “Is that why you invaded Dicathen at the cost of so many Alacryan lives? To expand this web through the soldiers?”

“I told you I needed eyes on the ground there,” Agrona said casually. “I just didn’t say whose eyes I was really looking through.”

Seeming to understand, Cecilia quickly rattled off all the locations where she had sensed Arthur’s aetheric signature.

“I’ll need to search one location at a time,” Ji-ae said apologetically. “I just can’t manage a wider search all at once.” Then, after a few moments, “The signature coming from beneath the ancient djinn refuge of…forgive me, the settlement’s name does not appear to be contained within my memory. The signature coming from beneath the desert of the Dicathian nation of Darv definitely isn’t Arthur Leywin, though from what you have said it was certainly created by him.”

A picture of the chamber where Cecilia had fought the asura appeared in my thoughts, focusing on an egg-shaped ball of amethyst energy.

One by one, Ji-ae repeated the process for each of the locations where Arthur might have been. I dreaded each one, then felt a sudden but short-

lived relief as it proved not to be him before she quickly moved onto the next. In all, the process took several minutes.

“The density of signals capable of reaching the location indicated within the remnants of the elven nation of Elenoir are fairly limited. Based upon what I can sense, however, I would calculate that there is a…ninety-five percent chance that Arthur Leywin is *not* at this location.”

Agrona’s face tightened into a slight frown as Cecilia fidgeted. “Clever, Arthur. So all of your hiding places are fakes, and your real signature was hidden well enough to fool even the Legacy.” Agrona chuckled. “This was a brazen gambit for one who claims to hold the lives of his friends and family in such regard. Okay, Ji-ae, focus on exactly those places where Arthur *hasn’t* attempted to draw attention. What is he trying to keep us from seeing?”

“Of course, Agrona. This may take a moment.”

Agrona and Cecilia waited in silence.

A map flashed suddenly into my mind, followed by the disembodied voice. “Strange. There appears to be an aetheric anomaly present at *this* location.” A red light burned on the map in a spot near the Grand Mountains between the Beast Glades and what used to be Elshire Forest. “While not an aether source, this anomaly bears the same signature as the conjurations used to obfuscate Arthur Leywin’s physical presence. Based on the information I have access to at the moment, this carries all the trademarks of a conjured pocket dimension.” The crystal pulsed as the voice finished speaking, seeming proud of itself.

Agrona’s face carved into a tight, predatory smile. “Ah, Arthur. I should have realized myself. We think so much alike, you and I.” Reaching out, Agrona ran a hand along one of the spinning rings, which slowed to let him do so, the lavender light of the crystal flickering. “Well done, Ji-ae. Rest now. I won’t call upon you again until you have regained your full strength.”

The crystal brightened. “Be careful, Agrona. Tampering with Fate is… dangerous.”

The ancient asura winked boyishly at the glowing crystal. “You old flirt, Ji-ae.”

Hurry, Arthur, whatever you’re doing, I pleaded, knowing no one but myself could hear.

Agrona opened the door, and a shouting voice echoed through the halls to reach us. The voice was calling Cecilia’s name.

Cecilia hurried past Agrona, who stopped to secure the door behind us. “Nico!” she yelled, turning around twice as she tried to figure out which direction his voice was coming from. “I’m here!”

Running footsteps resounded off the hallway walls, and Nico burst around a corner, sliding to a stop. He was red-faced and breathless, looking at her with relief and fear. “Cecilia…I was so afraid—they said you’d left the rift—what are you…” He stopped, struggling to catch his breath. “What happened?”

Both Cecilia and Nico stiffened as Agrona caught up with them. He whistled jauntily, all pretense of his earlier anger and disappointment washed away. “Well well, Nico, you are just in time to return to Dicathen with us. We’re going to pick up your old friend, Grey.” Nico’s brows fell and his mouth opened, but Agrona kept talking. “Yes, we have in fact found him. And yes, he is in fact resting right where I sent you to look, inside Sylvia’s cave, the cave your report assured me was empty.”

Nico only looked more confused, his eyes jumping from Agrona to Cecilia as if her blank face alone could answer his questions.

Agrona rolled his eyes. “I swear, Cadell would have noticed a pocket dimension if it was staring him in the face. But then, you’re no Cadell…”

Nico sagged, but Cecilia bristled. “Agrona…”

Agrona took his hands from his pockets and raised them defensively. “Never mind. This is a moment for celebration!” He wrapped one arm around Cecilia’s shoulders, then did the same to Nico on the other side. “Because together, we’re finally going to kill Arthur Leywin.”

50

ASCENSION

ARTHUR LEYWIN

It all made sense now. For whatever reason, Tess was the vessel for Cecilia. Maybe it was because of our relationship in this world, which had to create the bridge, but that didn't matter.

If both Nico and I became this strong after reincarnating into this world, how strong would Cecilia—the "Legacy"—be if she reincarnated into Tess's body?

The distant echoes of my thoughts resounded over and under my present, wakeful self.

"Sylvie. You know what Rinia said." My voice came out pleading, but only because of the keystone's strange effect that caused events to play out just as they had. "We can't let them have Tess."

I felt Sylvie shake her head against the small of my back. She was holding me, keeping me from continuing to fight. Because Cadell and Nico were about to take her. And I was dying. "We'll both get stronger," she said, her voice muffled. "As long as we're alive, we have a chance."

With Aroa's Requiem channeled, I reached out and pinched the golden thread between my fingers. Time froze.

Tessia was still in the act of turning away from me. She had just spoken the words I had feared might be the last she ever would. It was almost funny, in a way; I was so distracted that I still hadn't heard what she said. I considered reversing time, paying closer attention, only…

Beyond Tessia, battle-weary and blood-stained, Cadell and Nico waited for her. The city of Telmore was burning around them, the sky-high flames like stained glass against the smoke-filled sky.

This was the moment everything changed.

And this is our next challenge to bypass if we want to continue forward, I communicated to Sylvie and Regis.

Sylvie's body untensed from behind me as her conscious self exerted control. Her arms relaxed, falling to her sides, and she stepped around me, her gaze sweeping across the frozen battlefield.

Regis manifested beside me, rising from the darkness and into the keystone world in his large shadow wolf form. "And how exactly do we do that, princess?"

We had spent some time following the threads of time and Fate back and forth through these early years of my life, but we hadn't unlocked any new insight into the keystone's mechanics or the aspect of Fate. Whether by the nature of interacting directly with the golden threads through Aroa's Requiem or Sylvie and Regis's grounding presence, I'd discovered that I could make changes and explore alternate events without forgetting myself.

Even as I thought this, Regis loped away from me to stand beside Nico. With a mischievous look, Regis reared up and closed his jaws around Nico's throat. The thread jerked loose from my grip, and the world lurched into motion again. There was a spray of blood, and Nico stumbled backward, falling hard on the ground with a choked, gurgling cry.

Before the scene could go any further, I grabbed hold of the thread again with Aroa's Requiem and pulled slightly, reversing time to before Regis's attack. "Feel better now?" I asked Regis, my voice thick with exasperation.

"Not really," he admitted, his lupine shoulders rising and falling as he sighed deeply.

“Focus,” Sylvie chided him gently before turning back to me. “Go ahead, Arthur. I’m ready.”

I focused on the Aroa’s Requiem godrune again, barely noticing the constant itch in my physical core anymore. Slowly, wanting to experience everything as it happened, I pulled us forward along the golden thread, experiencing again my creation of the pocket dimension that allowed me to safely remove Tessia and the others from the battlefield through a portal created from Rinia’s medallion.

Sylvie cast her own spell—if that was even the right word for what she’d done in transferring her life energy to me—and we looked at each other as, once again, she faded.

I gripped the thread tight, freezing us again.

Sylvie was still there, a person in two parts: a ghostly aspect formed within the lavender and gold dust, and a bright silver spark of concentrated life force that was drifting toward me with all the rest of her energy, attaching itself to me. *Sylv?*

The silver mote sparkled while the ghostly image remained frozen. I clenched my fists and pumped my arms in excitement. *It worked!*

‘It did, although…I’m having a hard time forcing myself to remain conscious in this form…’

Of course, I thought back, feeling foolish. *Drift into me. Regis, guide her.*

Regis, who had already returned to his incorporeal state, drifted out of me and flitted to the silver spark. Buzzing around each other like glowflies, the dark wisp and the silver spark fluttered jaggedly, growing closer with each sharp turn until they vanished into my chest.

‘Oh!’ Sylvie thought, her mind relaxing and allowing me to release our shared tension. *‘That’s a lot better.’*

Let’s go.

The thread again moved through my fingers, and I fell into the portal that I had conjured.

Only…it didn’t take me to the underground sanctuary as was intended. It had worked for Nyphia, Madam Astera, and Tessia, but as I fell into it now, stepping carefully forward through time, I could see the weave of aetheric magic coming undone. As the portal collapsed, it left behind a sort of hole.

A hole into the aetheric realm, I realized.

Just on the other side was a large circular hall with smooth white pillars holding the ceiling up, lit by a warm glow.

Golden energy was oozing out of the solid stone, pressing against the edges of the hole left behind by the portal, keeping it open as I entered. The portal was gone, and the hole between dimensions swallowed itself the moment I passed through it. The golden light flickered and faded, and I was left lying on the floor, just as I had been when I first awoke in the Relictombs.

Sylvie? Regis?

‘We’re here,’ they answered together, two nodes of warmth and consciousness within my now broken core.

I rolled onto my back and grinned up at the blank ceiling. “It worked.”

Regis manifested beside me and trotted across the chamber. He sniffed around for a minute. *‘The egg thing. It isn’t here.’*

We must not need it then, I thought, both nervous and hopeful. *Sylv? Are you able to come out?*

‘I’ll try.’

The silver spark drifted out of my chest. It was hesitant, bobbing in the air just beyond the shelter of my flesh and bone. Regis’s wolf form became transparent and immaterial, then shrank into a dark wisp, which zipped to Sylvie’s side. The two whirled around each other momentarily, then—

Regis swallowed the silver spark. Or at least, that’s what it looked like. For a couple of seconds, Sylvie was visible only as a small amount of silver light leaking through the dark wisp’s incorporeal body. Their combined thoughts were distorted and difficult to parse, but I waited, trusting them both just as much as I trusted my own self.

Regis began to glow with dim golden light. Gold and lavender particles emanated from the wisp before taking shape in front of me. Sylvie was drawn in bright gold out of thin air, her features coming clear as the halo around her faded. Regis reappeared at her side, dark against her light.

With Realmheart still active, I watched the threads of Fate carefully. Interestingly, the timeline was not drastically altered by Sylvie's appearance in the flesh.

"I was always here, in a way," she said, picturing the stone egg in her mind. "That piece of me never left you." She turned her hands over and looked at them questioningly. "It's strange, though. I don't feel quite…real." Then, without warning, she dissolved back into light, appearing only as the spark. *'Look! I can—'*

The spark darted forward, moving effortlessly through my flesh to drift around the ruined remains of my core. *'But why would I be able to do this?'*

"Could be just a glitch in the matrix," Regis said, sitting back on his haunches, his tongue lolling. "But my incredibly educated opinion is that Fate is fucking with us."

Sylvie reappeared before me. "Mouth, Regis," she scolded gently, biting back a smile.

"The laws of reality seem to be breaking down the more powerful we get," I said as I reached out and squeezed my bond's hand. "It does raise the question though: What happens when we leave here? It makes sense we will still know anything new that we learn or any insight we gain through the keystone, but what if I—I don't know—unlock a new godrune? Just as an example."

"An interesting question, but the bigger one still remains," Sylvie replied. "How is this getting us any closer to insight into Fate and escaping the keystone?"

I couldn't quite hold back the frown that I fell across my face. "The Relictombs is where all djinn knowledge is kept. Everything they knew about Fate is here, somewhere. Looking back, my path through it was full of missed opportunities. First, I want to see what happens when I rebuild

my aether core inside the keystone. After that…we do what all ascenders do.”

Navigating the Relictombs inside of the keystone was different than it had been in reality. My ability to pull us back and forth through time allowed me to explore in a way I couldn’t before. Curious, I drifted forward until Caera and I claimed the Compass from the Central Academy reliquary, then stored the Compass in my extradimensional storage rune and reversed time again, all the way back to the first zone I’d entered.

Once again standing inside the unadorned chamber, I looked into the extradimensional space. The Compass was there, waiting for me, despite my having technically acquired it in the future. Feeling a rising excitement, I withdrew the Compass and turned it over in my hand. The burnished sphere was still a dead relic, so I channeled Aroa’s Requiem and proceeded to again repair it.

“Now we can go anywhere,” Regis said, padding around me eagerly, his claws tapping against the stone floor. The tapping stopped, and he looked up at me with a frown on his lupine face. “Anywhere except the millipede. Never again…”

I chuckled in good humor. There was a sense of hopefulness shared between the three of us. “Actually, I was thinking. We’ve now got everything we need to navigate the Relictombs together, but before we do, there is something else I want to know.”

Sylvie’s brows rose as she realized my intention. “I…would like that. Do you think…”

“Yeah, I don’t see why not. It’s the keystone, after all. And if something goes wrong, now we can easily try again.” I tapped my sternum. “Better get inside me, though. We’re going pretty far back.”

Sylvie’s gold eyes shone brightly for just a moment before she transformed into the sprite and both her and Regis took shelter within my core. Taking a

deep breath, I activated Realmheart and Aroa's Requiem, took the golden thread in my fingertips, and pulled hard.

My lifetime flew past in reverse, unspooling all my many accomplishments and failures in a matter of moments. The war, Epheotus, Xyrus Academy, the Beast Glades with Jasmine…and then I was again standing in front of Sylvia's cave, only a boy freshly separated from my family. And yet my young skin was marked by the spellforms and godrunes. More strangely, the core in my chest brimmed with both aether *and* mana.

"We'll see what grandma has to say about this…" I muttered, starting the climb down into the cave where Sylvia waited.

All the other times I had lived through this moment played in the back of my mind, the memories overlapping and blurring together. A realization struck me. *After enough time in here, one life would become indistinguishable from another.*

'The keystone would swallow you whole,' Sylvie added, and a shiver ran down my spine.

The end is in sight. It has to be.

I landed at the bottom of the long fall, supporting my body with both mana and aether.

"So child, we finally…" Sylvia's resounding voice trailed off. She gaped down at me, her tree-story-tall frame sitting stiffly on the throne of jagged stone. Those red eyes—so petrifying to me as a child—were full of wonder, confusion, and…fear as they burrowed into and through me. The massive horns growing up from her demonic visage turned slightly as her head did the same. "But I don't understand…"

"I'd be surprised if you did," I answered casually. Sticking my hands in the pockets of my childhood trousers, I bobbed up and down on the balls of my feet and regarded her with a smile. "There is a lot we need to talk about, Grandma Sylvia."

An hour later, Sylvia and I sat together on the ground in front of a small fire. Instead of her demonic or dragon forms, Sylvia looked the way I had seen her in her portrait. She was a handsome woman, refined and noble,

somewhere in her middle years by human standards. Her light blond hair wasn't braided around her head like a crown, as it had been for the painting, but hung in a single thick braid over her shoulder.

Her iridescent lavender eyes met mine, still the azure I'd inherited from my father. "That is…quite a story, Arthur. How many times have you rewound time to bring us to this point?"

"None," I said in my small voice. "Assuming you believe me. Otherwise —" Realmheart activated, lifting the hair on my head and conjuring glowing runes under my eyes.

She raised a hand to forestall me. "I do. How could I not? You are filled with the confidence of one who knows they cannot fail."

I grimaced and released the godrune. "Can't fail here, with you, maybe. But the greater picture—Fate—is still very much undecided."

"And…" She hesitated, her fingers unconsciously playing with her braid. "And my daughter?"

I smiled softly. "Prepare yourself, Grandma Sylvia." *Come out, Sylv.*

The silver sprite floated out of my sternum, drifting like a leaf on the wind around me. Sylvia watched it with intense apprehension. After several long seconds, the little light spread out, molding into Sylvie in much the same way her human form changed into the dragon. She appeared with her hair intricately braided and wrapped around her head, not entirely unlike Sylvia's portrait, and wearing a battledress of black scales.

Sylvie's jaw worked silently. Grandma Sylvia stood, favoring her wounded side. The two regarded each other without words, a subtle tension building between them.

Then, at the same moment, they both stepped forward and wrapped their arms around one another. All the tension flowed away as if carried on a receding tide. Sylvie let out a surprised, childish, lovely laugh, and her mother followed suit. Grandma Sylvia looked down at me over Sylvie's shoulders, and her eyes shone with tears.

Finally, Grandma Sylvia pulled back, although she kept her hands on Sylvie's arms. "You are more beautiful than I ever could have hoped. Oh, my daughter. I thought, well…" She swallowed visibly and gave a small shake of her head, causing a single tear to slip free of her eye and trail down her cheek. "It seems as though entrusting your egg to Arthur was the wisest decision I could have made."

The two began to talk, Grandma Sylvia asking questions and Sylvie answering them as best she could. The tale of Sylvie's life so far was not entirely a happy one, and Grandma Sylvia alternated between flushing red and growing pale as Sylvie answered her questions to the best of her ability. It was strange, seeing her like this, huddled around the little fire, sitting on the ground with Sylvie, both in their humanoid forms.

I'm glad I got to see her like this, though, even if it's only a simulation, I thought to myself, my throat constricting with suppressed emotion.

Regis shifted, resting his chin on my leg. *'Emotional support weapon of mass destruction, reporting for duty, sir,'* he teased.

I felt a small smile smooth away my frown and rubbed him between the ears. *At ease.*

The conversation between Sylvie and her mother continued only for ten minutes before Grandma Sylvia hesitantly broached the topic of Agrona.

"Yes. I know Agrona is my father," Sylvie answered, lifting her chin and looking suddenly defiant. "I have tried not to let that fact color my view of you too negatively."

Grandma Sylvia gave her daughter a soft, understanding smile, but her eyes were cast toward the ground. "That is maybe more than I deserve, then. Thank you."

I cleared my throat and rubbed the back of my neck, hesitant to intrude on the moment, but I reminded myself that, as real as this may feel to Sylvie, this version of Sylvia didn't exist. We had come for a reason, and I needed those answers. "When you fled from him, how did you learn about the djinn ruins? Where did you get that map?"

Grandma Sylvia bit her lip, an unexpected expression to see on her regal features, and shot a look at Sylvie before turning her attention back to me. “Since you already know so much, I don’t see the harm in explaining further, although I…never expected to be telling this to anyone.” She paused to gather her thoughts. “There was a device in Agrona’s fortress—a relic of the djinn. Only, it had a djinn mind housed within it.”

“Like in the ruins,” I said, startled. “But how?”

Sylvia’s brows pinched together slightly, and her eyes were focused somewhere beyond the fire, looking at a past only she could see. “He found her in the early days, when his people had only just begun exploring the Relictombs for him. It was her job to help navigate the place, as well as to store and catalog the djinn’s knowledge related to their creations. But Agrona had already managed to remove her from the Relictombs and install her deep beneath his fortress by the time he was banished and I so foolishly tried to warn him of my father’s plans.”

“Her?” Sylvie asked.

“The djinn…spirit. Ji-ae,” Grandma Sylvia answered, looking away. “It was from her that I learned the truth.”

Sylvie leaned forward and hugged her knees to her chest. “What truth?”

“When I returned for Agrona, I found him a shell of the asura I had fallen in love with. Perhaps it was the real him, and I had only ever known a shadow, or perhaps his banishment and betrayal of the other asura—including, he thought, me—broke something in him. He imprisoned me when he learned I was pregnant, desiring to experiment on his own child, to learn more about how dragons manipulated aether and how he could use it against them. His own daughter, and he saw you as nothing but another experiment.”

Her teeth clenched tight, and a bright fire burned in her eyes. “Ji-ae showed me what was in store for you—for both of us. But she said…” Sylvia hesitated, taking a shaky breath. “She said fate had something else in store for you. She showed me a boy, told me about the reincarnation of a king from another world, Grey, and how he would protect you, if only I could find him.”

“And that’s how you got the map to the djinn ruins.” I shook my head in disbelief. “Yet again, Fate seems to be playing with me. Lining everything up just so.”

We lapsed into silence, and I watched the small fire crackle away merrily, its bright orange flames blissfully ignorant of the pressure resting on my shoulders.

Although I had learned what I’d come for, it didn’t leave me satisfied. In fact, the revelation that Agrona had one of the djinn remnants at his disposal, and that it was apparently both willing to help him *and* had a more in-depth understanding of the djinn people’s knowledge than any of the remnants I had discovered, did not bring me peace of mind.

It’s time. We should go, I sent to Sylvie.

‘Just a bit longer,’ she thought back, her golden eyes turning toward me pleadingly. *‘I may never get the chance to speak to her again.’*

You’re not speaking to her now, I replied gently, consolingly. *This isn’t Sylvia, only a shadow of her created by the keystone.*

‘I…you’re right, of course.’ Sylvie stood stiffly, no longer looking at me. *‘I’m losing hold of my emotions.’*

Standing, I gave a respectful bow. “Grandma. Thank you. I…know this conversation probably hasn’t made a lot of sense from your perspective, but you’ve been a great help. Unfortunately, we should go—”

“Wait,” she said, clutching her side as she stood. “Before you do, I’ve been thinking. You said I gave you my will and that through it you were able to utilize the Realmheart technique. I know why it destroyed you, and I think that I can provide you with the insight needed to better control it.”

“That isn’t necessary,” I answered with a small shake of my head. “When this is over, I won’t be able to use mana anymore, and although I’ll regain Realmheart eventually, it will be in a different form.”

“Still,” Sylvia said, a pleading tone audible in her voice, and I remembered the fact that, when I stayed with her in my real life, she had kept me for months longer than had been required, in part due to her own loneliness.

She continued, saying, “Perhaps this insight will be applicable to your version of Realmheart, then. I’d like to know that…this knowledge lives on when I am gone.”

My building urge to be on our way subsided, and I released a deep breath, feeling myself deflate. Forcing on a grateful smile to hide the complicated emotions this meeting had stirred up within me, I said, “Of course, Grandma Sylvia. Please, show us.”

“Well, the first djinn remnant wasn’t any more helpful this time around,” Regis noted grumpily as I activated the Compass to take us away from the first ruin.

“He was helpful enough, but he didn’t have anything more to give us,” Sylvie replied, her gaze sweeping across the messy laboratory one last time.

“At least I got another look at that aether technique of his,” I said. I had tried to get the old djinn remnant to teach me, but he was fixated on the test.

The portal whirled as its destination changed under influence of the Compass, and my companions took shelter within my core. I stepped through.

The shattered entrance to the second ruin lay behind. I hurried through until I reached the black crystal gate, trapped in its cycle of breaking and reforming. *‘Enter-welcome-descendant-please,’* the words formed in my head. As before, I activated God Step and jumped to the other side, coming to stand before the second djinn remnant pedestal.

As Sylvia had taught me more about Realmheart, I came to a realization that had previously only floated on the edges of conscious thought.

I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing, really. I couldn’t escape without discovering insight into Fate, but I didn’t know exactly how to pursue that insight. Unlike the previous keystones, this one was completely open-ended. No puzzle was laid out before me, no goal provided. I had learned how to navigate and manipulate the world created by the keystone,

and that had brought on some small insight in the form of the golden threads, but since then I had gotten no closer to unlocking whatever power the keystone contained.

But that didn't mean I couldn't do something.

The second djinn projection stepped out from behind the pillar. Short and thin with muted pinkish-lavender skin and short-cropped amethyst hair, she wore white shorts and a chest wrap that displayed the interlocking patterns of spellform runes that covered her body.

She gave me a weak, sad smile. "So someone recovered my creation after all. In truth, I expected its shrine to sit undisturbed until the end of time—wait. You've heard these words before. You've…seen me before." The smile turned down into a distrustful frown. "Who are you?"

"You already know. And I think you also know what I've come for. There is no need to worry about the test you've been tasked with. Instead, I want to learn what only you can teach me."

Her brows slowly rose. "I can see it in your mind. You have the strength to fight back, to strike and spill the blood of our enemies. You are exactly who I have been waiting for, and I will train you to wield aether not only as a tool of creation, but as a true weapon of destruction."

A long, thin, curved aether blade appeared in her left hand, then a second in her right. She crossed them in front of her, sparks flying through the air where they touched. "I will train you."

I summoned my own sword of aether, holding it in both hands. Then a second manifested to my right at shoulder height, and a third to my left beside my hip.

The djinn regarded me with surprise and delight. She took a step back, and several more swords appeared around her. "Yes, you are who I have been waiting for."

It is difficult to say how long we trained. Time became an aetheric blur, space shrank to that single small chamber. Her words came back to me as we fought: *Only after you understand aether as itself can you begin to understand Fate.* I recited it like a mantra, pushing myself to understand

every aspect of my abilities as I fought her. When she began to slow, no longer capable of pushing herself to the full depth of her abilities due to the failing mechanics of her housing, I pulled the thread back to the beginning and did it all over again.

My companions were not left to watch. Although they didn't fight beside me, the djinn projection kept up a steady lecture on the aevum and vivum arts. It turned out that she knew quite a lot about the nature of Destruction, and I could feel Regis's insight deepening as he absorbed her teachings.

By the third repetition, however, I knew there was a limit to what this single djinn remnant could teach us. I needed to push myself further, harder—we all did. And so, we moved on.

The three of us passed from zone to zone, finding and conquering challenge after challenge. We didn't settle for simply completing each zone but examined the foundations of the spaces and the tests they provided us. After all, that was the purpose of the Relictombs: to house the djinn's aetheric knowledge, with each chapter providing a real, physical example of said aether arts.

It proved a difficult task. I was reminded of the computers of my old world, with programs coded in a special language invented just for the task. Studying the Relictombs was like trying to learn that language by studying the output of a program. I lacked the underlying knowledge required to even begin seeing the entire picture.

But through use, practice, and hardship, Sylvie, Regis, and I honed our own abilities across dozens of chapters and trials, against thousands of enemies. Only one ability didn't increase in potency. In fact, I had yet to be able to make use of it at all.

As we stood in the frozen dome at the heart of the snowy zone where I had originally met Three Steps and the other tribes, I considered King's Gambit. The godrune had been provided by a keystone; it would have made sense for it to be an essential part of navigating this keystone, just like Realmheart and Aroa's Requiem. And yet it seemed to do nothing at all. Nothing aside from filling my thoughts with fog and giving me a headache, anyway.

It was for that reason that I had returned to this zone. The zone's tribes had an instinctive sense of aether use that even the dragons couldn't claim. The Shadow Claws, in particular, communicated in a way that required mental manipulation of aether, and I thought that they might be able to offer some useful insight.

What I found instead was an empty wasteland. The tribes were gone. There was evidence of battle spread across the zone, the skeletons of Shadow Claws, Spear Beaks, Four Fists, and Ghost Bears scattered through the snow like leaves fallen from the trees. Frozen wounds like claws and bites marred their bodies, and although we had searched, we found none alive.

"Maybe, since you and Caera never came, the 'wild things' grew beyond control," Sylvie mused as I repaired the exit portal.

"Where are they now then?" Regis asked from where he was nosing through a pile of bones at the foot of the central dais.

"It doesn't matter."

The aetheric motes of Aroa's Requiem ran down my arms and along the portal frame. I didn't have the pieces of the portal frame, but I didn't need them this time. As the godrune rebuilt the portal, I reminded myself that this wasn't real.

"We could return back to the time when you'd just entered the Relictombs and then allow time to move forward as normal until you reach this place again?" Sylvie suggested, her face bathed in a lightly purple glow from the portal that appeared inside the repaired frame.

"That could work. I…" I trailed off as I looked through the portal.

It was translucent, showing a slightly blurred version of what was behind it. Except the portal didn't show a different place, only the other side of the frame. On that side, though, the weathering of the dais was different, the stone smoother. The light was a warmer shade, and there were…

"It's the same place, but a different *time*," I gasped. "Regis!"

He leapt from the floor below all the way to the top of the dais, then vanished into me. Sylvie did the same just behind him, and I stepped

through the portal.

It didn’t feel like traveling through the Relictombs’ portals usually did. It was more like walking through a door from a cold outside to the warm interior of a house. Spring smells hit my nose, as did the musky odor of some kind of animal. The air was filled with voices, some deep and sonorous, others more cutting and beaky.

I stared around in wonder.

The white stone of the zone’s central dome gleamed with clean golden-white light. Dozens of Shadow Claws, Spear Beaks, Four Fists, and Ghost Bears wandered between rows of tables and stalls on one side of the dome. The other was an open space where even more played games or sat and watched, chatting animatedly. The bipedal, catlike Shadow Claws touched paws with huge white Ghost Bears, engaged in memory-speech, while Four Fists and Spear Beaks eagerly exchanged bags of nuts for vials of greenish liquid.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

I spun around, realizing a man was leaning against the other side of the portal frame and watching the people move around below. He had light-blue skin with a tinge of purple around his eyes and mouth, purple hair that was dark enough that it was almost black, and every inch of his exposed flesh was covered in spellforms.

“You’re a djinn,” I said stupidly.

His soft pink eyes flicked to me for barely an instant before turning back to the mingling tribes. “They all said I was mad, trying to create sentient life. And that was from the nice ones. Those who were more honest compared me to the dragons.” He laughed lightly, a soft and musical sound. “Imagine? All that, everything that was happening, and still a djinn would have the gall to call another djinn an *Indrath* under her breath as she passed me in the halls?”

I stared blankly at the djinn man, utterly bemused.

“Anyway, I’m glad you could come, Arthur-Grey.” The djinn pushed himself away from the portal frame and held out his arms. “There is much

to discuss, my old friend. About the future."

I rubbed the back of my neck and regarded him uncertainly. "I'm sorry, how do you know me?"

He cocked his head slightly to the side. "We're old friends, Arthur-Grey. I've told you everything about my work, and now I need to discuss what happens next. In the future. The far future, in fact. I can't do this without you, old friend."

'This is getting weird,*'* Regis thought, his focus turning around and around as he attempted to watch everyone inside the dome all at once. *'It feels like one of those build-ups just before a jump-scare moment. I don't like it.'*

'I can't help but agree. Something is definitely not what it seems,' Sylvie added.

"I'm sorry, I don't know you," I said firmly, taking a step back. "What is your name?"

"Arthur-Grey, I am Haneul, your old friend." The djinn regarded me not with confusion or suspicion, but with a soft smile and deep, trusting eyes. "You know all about my creation of this chapter and the many trials I've overcome."

I looked around, feeling more and more like I was on the outside of some joke I didn't understand.

"Ah, but I see my mistake now," Haneul said, frowning down at his feet. "I have chosen poorly. These memories were stored in some kind of device. Because the device is within your extradimensional space, I did not immediately recognize them as being separate from your person." Haneul sighed. "I think you might say it is humorously ironic that I have waited for so long to introduce myself to you, and yet still I have somehow managed to make a mistake."

"What device? What are you—"

The djinn memory crystal. Clear as day, I recalled picking up the crystal and the way many versions of the same voice were played across my mind. It was Haneul's voice. *I never listened to the messages contained inside that*

crystal. It must have been like a journal. His log of the work being done… here, in this chapter of the Relictombs.

'If this 'Haneul' can see even into the extradimensional storage space linked by that spellform…' Regis's thoughts trailed off meaningfully. Suddenly, I understood.

As if responding to my understanding, reality began to unwind.

It started with the portal frame, the stone of which turned to something like cotton candy, which pulled apart and floated away. Then the dome was billowing above us, dispersing like light clouds to reveal the blue sky. But cracks were running through the sky to reveal the black-purple emptiness beyond.

By the time I looked back down, all of the tribal people were gone, as was the dais on which I'd been standing.

Only the djinn and the portal remained, floating in the emptiness of the aether realm.

"Fate." The word came out without my meaning it to, but as soon as I said it, I was sure it was true. I activated Realmheart.

Sylvie manifested to one side, Regis to the other. Our three connected minds were equally in awe of what we were seeing.

The djinn was no more. Instead, a knotwork of golden threads was tied together into a vaguely human form. Dozens, maybe hundreds or even thousands, of threads extended away in every direction, vanishing into the endless expanse of the aetheric realm.

"Arthur-Grey. I have been awaiting your ascension."

51

HORIZON'S EDGE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Despite having no visible eyes, the knotwork face of the golden, glowing being stared into me, right down to my bones. My own mind seemed blank, destitute of intention or conscious thought. I could feel the golden threads knitting their way through my mind and memories, my past, present, and future. The sensation terrified me on an existential level.

"Who are you?" My voice was hollow and soft, the baritone resonance swallowed by the void and my own doubt.

"You have already said it." The threads pulsed and vibrated as the entity spoke. "I am Fate. Or…an aspect of Fate. The mouth."

As I struggled to come up with something else to say, I desperately searched the wide expanse of aetheric void that surrounded us. The only concrete feature of the vast black-purple emptiness was the portal. I wondered what would happen if I tried to flee back through it.

No, this is why we're here, I reminded myself, trying to mentally force my way through the uncharacteristic fear that was robbing me of my senses. "What was that, back there? Haneul? The Shadow Claws and other tribes? Why the charade?"

The golden threads unraveled, shivered through the air, and wound themselves back into the humanoid form to our left, putting us between Fate and the portal. Sylvie and Regis rotated around me to keep the three of us facing Fate.

“I chose a figure from your memories that I thought would put you at ease in order to make this conversation more comfortable.” Again, the threads vibrated, a hint of which came through in the resonant, inhuman voice of Fate’s aspect. “You carry with you many hundreds of hours of remembrances from the one called Haneul, giving the appearance of great importance.” Something like a laugh shivered through the form, sending ripples along the many hundreds of golden threads extending outward from it. “Perhaps it was not comfort you needed to introduce you into this conversation, but confusion.”

I glanced at Sylvie, who met my eye with a raised brow. *‘This…isn’t exactly what I expected.’*

Regis tilted his head, perplexed. *‘Me neither.’*

“Your expectations could only prove to be malformed,” the figure responded, as if it could hear our thoughts. “You know so little, but your insight has brought you to the cusp of greater understanding. To the horizon’s edge. Your growth, your power—your many successes and failures—has prepared you for one thing, and one thing alone.”

“To wield the aspect of aether known as Fate?” I asked aloud, a shiver running up my spine.

“No.” The word hung in the air, seeming to resound from each and every string that made up the entity’s physical form. “But your misunderstanding is very…human.”

Before I could reply, colors spilled across the void, swirling and melting together to form a cloudy blue sky, a verdant green field, and an expanse of rolling ocean, each white-capped wave gleaming like so many diamonds in a yellow sun. By the time my focus returned to the aspect of Fate, it had again wrapped itself in the blue-skinned, pink-eyed djinn, Haneul.

I took an experimental step; the ground beneath my feet seemed solid. Bending down, I ran my palm over the blades of grass, feeling each one bend and then spring back into place. Something about the scene was familiar. “Where are we?”

“It depends on *when* you are,” Haneul replied. He approached the edge of a tall cliff that rose vertically up from a wide beach below. Shadows rushed suddenly across the landscape, and buildings began to rise out of the sand. Dark figures moved across the beach like many thousands of ants. “The wraiths were the first to build here. A very, very long time ago.”

A great city grew up before us, alive with the little dark figures that appeared and disappeared too quickly to make out. The city swallowed the coastline and the cliff, extending as far as the eye could see in every direction. Then other figures appeared. White shadows, then blue, then red and brown, all descended on the city. Although the distant scene lacked detail, it was obvious that a terrible battle was unfolding. Both sides suffered greatly, and, by the time it was over, the landscape had been returned to its previous state. Nothing was left of the city.

I recalled what Kezess had told me about the ancient branch of asuras called the wraiths. “We just saw all the other asuras banding together against the warlike wraiths, didn’t we?” I said, mostly speaking to myself.

Soon, white figures were swarming the beach and, just as the dark figures representing the wraiths had done before them, began building up a great city. Only, before the city was complete, all the white blurs vanished. I frowned down at the half-built ghost city for several long moments. Just as I was about to turn to Haneul and ask what had happened, the land opened up and swallowed the city whole.

“When the dragons took Epheotus from this world, they scrubbed all signs of their civilization from the land so that future people would know nothing of them.” Haneul looked sadly down on the empty beach. The construction and fall of the two cities had left the landscape roughened and the cliff face carved away in part. “It is always here. This place calls to every civilization that grows from the soil of this land.”

“What do you—”

I went silent as a new people spread across the beach. Their progress was slower than the wraiths or the dragons. Starting with small huts, they grew their village into a town, and then into a small city pressed up against the cliff face. The land around us was tilled and churned to brown soil where crops were grown. Thick plumes of smoke began to pour from the chimneys of some buildings, which were now made of brick instead of clay or wood. Docks extended out into the ocean, and small sailing vessels appeared. Their progress seemed to halt for some time, and then…

White blurs rained down white fire, and the city was erased in the blink of an eye.

My first thought was of the djinn, but I had seen a djinn city. This hadn't looked the same. But, as before, the white shapes were the dragons…

A chilling notion darkened my mind, and I turned to Haneul for confirmation. His pink eyes stayed on the beach.

Not long after, another group of people appeared. Like before, they slowly built up the land, surpassing the previous civilization as towering structures became the backbone of a walled city that spread down the coastline in each direction. Then, the blurred white shapes came again, and the buildings crumbled. By the time the dragons left, all signs of the city were undone.

Sylvie gave a low, pained moan, her gaze unblinking as she watched the shadowy destruction play out before us.

"This is one small corner of one little continent of this world, during one narrow window of time," Haneul said, his voice strangely empty of emotion. "You need to see this to understand. Only when you understand will you be able to see."

Time continued to pass by in a flood, and several more cities grew up and were destroyed, each one representing a civilization, an entirely new people. Then a city grew up that I recognized.

"The djinn city. The one I saw in the trial. Zhoroa."

We were standing near the gazebo that overlooked the city, just to the side of the small waterfall. The peaceful era of the djinn seemed to last longer than the other civilizations, but I knew what was coming. When it did, I

looked away. I'd already seen the end of Zhoroa; I didn't need to experience it again.

When I looked back up, the djinn city was gone. No scrap or speck remained, not a ruined wall or a foundation. Nothing. "I've seen, but I don't understand," I said at length.

"I know," Haneul said.

Soon, people were back. This time, though, I could make some of them out. They were building atop the cliff, which had been worn down over time to create more of a slope. Instead of a plain stretch of ocean coastline, large parts of the wide beach had been altered by the preceding destruction, creating a familiar bay.

"Oh...that's fucked up," Regis exclaimed as realization dawned on him. "That's where Etistin is now."

The scene melted away, the ground dissolving under my feet, the sky coming apart in thin rags of color. We were once again floating inside the aetheric realm beside the portal. Haneul was gone, and in his place the aspect of Fate returned, its glowing silk body shedding light across me and my companions.

"Was that real?" Sylvie asked breathlessly, unable to keep her growing panic and disgust concealed from our connection.

The light around the aspect of Fate dimmed. "Yes."

"All those civilizations…" I had to swallow, moistening my dry, swollen throat. "The dragons destroyed each one?"

"Yes."

"That can't be," Sylvie said, shaking her head and turning away.

I didn't need to see her face to feel the tears leaking from her eyes. I rested my hand on her back in an attempt to comfort her. "What insight am I supposed to take from this? That the dragons didn't only wipe out the djinn, but also many other civilizations before them? How does that help me to understand Fate?"

The aspect unraveled again, only to reform right in front of me. “It is the foundation on which you must build your new understanding of aether.”

“How can we believe you? How can we believe anything in this place?” Sylvie’s words came out sharp, accusatory. “We’re in the keystone. You could be just a fabrication. Everything we’ve seen—even this conversation, even *you*—it could all be a fantasy.”

“Sylv…” I said, my tone consoling. Through our mental link, I drew her toward me. Although she didn’t move physically, her will rested against mine. A shiver ran through her, and her breath eased.

The aspect of Fate hung motionless in the void. “It is incorrect to state that we are in the artifact you call a keystone.”

Even as the entity spoke, I dug my fingers into my sternum, suddenly aware of the horrible itching sensation coming from my core. I wasn’t back in my physical body, I could still sense the distance between it and me, but at the same time, I could almost feel my breath moving evenly in and out of my lungs, my chest expanding and contracting. When I focused, I could even hear Sylvie next to me, her breath quicker, sharper, like someone about to be woken by a nightmare.

We were closer to ourselves, and yet not fully in one place or the other.

“That is true, Arthur-Grey. You are not fully in the keystone or the real world. Your mind is here, with me, in this prison.” The golden light fluttered with what my hindbrain translated as anger. “You three may believe this by simply choosing to do so. Fate is both within and without the keystone, just as you are.”

“A prison?” I asked, not fully comprehending what the aspect of Fate meant.

The golden-thread arms raised to the figure’s sides, a gesture that seemed to encompass the entire aetheric realm. “The world beyond, the plane of fire and earth, water and air, has not been allowed to grow in its natural course. This place—this aether realm as you think of it—is a symptom of the world being repressed, constricted. It is unnatural, its formation like a cyst on the waking world.”

Sylvie had drifted back a few paces. Her skin was pale, and she fidgeted with the sleeves of her black-scaled dress. “The destruction of all those civilizations…”

Her grandfather’s words came suddenly back to my mind: *“Everything I’ve done has been to keep this world alive, and it would be wise for you to place that firmly at the forefront of any further assumptions you make about me.”*

But there was more to it than that. Kezess had spoken of balance and of asuras battling and destroying the world. I couldn’t help but think that, perhaps, he had meant something other than by physical destruction.

I considered everything I knew about aether: it harbored a sort of consciousness, requiring the dragons to work alongside it, coaxing it into the shape they desired; by absorbing and purifying aether through my own aether core, I changed my relationship with it, allowing me to directly manipulate it instead of fighting only for a subtle amount of influence the way the dragons did; aether could change time, space, and the vital energy of life itself, being powerful enough even to connect, or separate, one’s spiritual essence from their flesh and blood body.

Although the first question in my mind was *why*, why the dragons and Kezess would want to suppress the world’s advancement, it wasn’t the question I asked. “What is aether, really? What is Fate?”

“Aether is everything before life and after death,” the aspect said. As it spoke, the golden threads wound around themselves and the doll-like figure grew. “Aether is both space and emptiness. It is endless and boundless time. It is the very essence of magic in this world.” The threads were wrapping around us now, like we were at the center of a ball of cotton yarn. Images played across the knotted string.

I saw…myself, falling. Only, the image that played in light across the inside of the sphere of golden thread wasn’t focused on me, but rather the man next to me. We fell and fell, and then…we stopped. My fall was arrested just before the collision with the hard ground, but the bandit wasn’t so lucky. The scene seemed to freeze. While I lay unconscious, the last few weak beats of the bandit’s heart pumped blood out into the soil from a

hundred wounds, and the small amount of mana that clung to his body released into the atmosphere.

Then, something else released too; a few tiny motes of aether, like amethyst sparks, drifted up from his body and were absorbed into the thin fog of atmospheric aether that sparkled to life in the image.

Beside and slightly within the image of the bandit's death, another image was playing as well. This one showed me dropping from a tree, my hand wreathed in a blade of wind. A quick strike across the carotid artery of a slaver, followed by a quick death. Again, the release of blood, mana, and finally, a few small motes of aether.

Other images played alongside these. Each one showed a different scene, but they were all the same: scenes of death. And accompanying each death, a release of aetheric particles.

Among the scenes, I locked onto one in particular. "No," I said, or at least I thought I did. I couldn't hear my own voice over the drumming of my pulse in my ears. I didn't want to see, but I couldn't look away.

In the image, my father's body lay broken among the carnage of battle. I thought he was already…gone, but the mana was still clinging to him. His lips were moving, just a bit. I couldn't take my gaze away from the horrible image. *"Alice. Ellie. Art."* The slow, silent movement of his lips spelled out our names. *"I love you. I…love you. I…"* His lips went still, and the constricting force of his core released. Purified mana rose off him like steam on a cold winter morning. And then, the aether.

I closed my eyes. "That's enough. I…understand."

When I opened my eyes again, the aspect of Fate had returned to the humanoid collection of tightly wound golden thread.

Sylvie wove her fingers through mine and gripped my hand tightly. I could feel her taking on a share of the emotional weight the scene had deposited on my shoulders.

To my other side, Regis shook his head, causing the flames of his mane to ripple like a flag. "So aether is…what, exactly? Dead people?"

The golden threads pulsed with an angry light. “Aether is the concentrated magical energy left behind by a living being when they pass on.”

“And it…carries some sense of their intention,” I added, the pieces falling into place in my mind. “Aether is aware and can be influenced…because it was once alive.”

Tears shone in my bond’s eyes. “That is why it remembers the shapes it has taken before. Entire civilizations of the dead. Others besides the djinn must have reached a stage where they could utilize aether. The spellforms…are the echo of their collective consciousness bonded into living magic.”

The aspect of Fate trembled, and the entire aetheric realm seemed to close in around us. “The cyst that is this realm must burst if the world is to be set back onto its proper course,” the aspect said. “The world suffers without aether, and the aether suffers without the world.”

I pictured the souls of all those who had passed in this world condensed into the aetheric realm and couldn’t help but wonder if some piece of my father was there as well. Not only my father, but Adam, Sylvia, Rinia, the Eraliths and the Glayders, Feyrith, Cynthia…there were too many dead to name. Were they suffering, trapped inside this unnatural prison?

“She said that the aetheric realm was how things ended…” Sylvie said, giving herself a little shake and pulling her hand free of mine. “From my vision, in the Relictombs.” Her eyes narrowed as she regarded the aspect of Fate. “How, exactly, is the world being repressed?”

The faceless head turned to regard Sylvie. Instead of words, images flashed through our collective minds: fields of the dead, their aether rising like violet ghosts above them; the silhouette of a dragon breathing a hole into the fabric of the world; a place in between places sucking in amethyst motes of energy like a sponge; waves of focus spilling out of a rift in the sky and reverberating across the surface of the world…

The images faded, and the aspect of Fate continued. “A scaled fist is closed around the world. Only when its grip is broken will the false walls corrupting the natural order be torn down.”

My stomach sank. I couldn’t place the sensation exactly, but something in the being’s tone made me uncomfortable. “What happens when these ‘false walls’ come down?”

“Existence continues. The worlds spin on. Time moves forward as it should.” With each word spoken, the golden threads flickered with wan light.

‘Entropy,’ Sylvie thought, the word resonating ominously inside me. *‘The natural order is to follow the arrow of time. Just like she said.’*

The aetheric space around us hardened, taking on defined edges, then color, and finally texture, a scene of the real world again bleeding into being around us. The bright and unmoving blue and gold scene was like standing inside a stained-glass window. But when I turned to look around, the hard edges blew away, just sand on the wind.

We were standing in the desert. A gusting breeze blew from the east, whipping sand into our faces. The figure of woven threads was once again Haneul. He waved a hand, and the wind subsided. Sand drifted like fine snow back down to the desert floor. In the distance, I could see the tall standing stone that had marked the direction of the hidden djinn refuge.

Haneul crossed his arms, slipping his hands into the opposite sleeve like some old monk. His eyes closed, and he turned his face toward the sun. “Channel the rune you call ‘God Step.’”

I hesitated. Instead of following Haneul’s instructions, I bent down and ran my fingers through the sand. “Is this the real world?”

“No.” Haneul did not look at me but maintained his meditative posture. “We are still in between. What you do now will have no effect outside of the keystone, but it will allow me to show you the answer to your question.”

‘Be careful, Arthur,’ Sylvie thought.

Standing straight again and brushing sand from my skin, I took a deep breath. With one foot in the real world and one in the keystone, it was easy to channel aether into the godrune. The aetheric pathways, bright lines of violet light, connected each point in space to every other point. Except the paths weren’t straight as they always had been before. The individual points

that marked possible destinations for God Step bulged, as if something were pushing them from the other side, and the connective paths bent and warped.

Haneul opened his eyes again. The light pink irises were tinged with motes of amethyst in the sunlight. “I have brought you to a future where you have already defeated your enemies, Arthur-Grey. The intent constricting this world has been released, but you are still needed. I will teach you how to lance the wound.”

Sylvie nervously shifted her footing in the sand beside me. Regis eyed Haneul warily.

Instead of stepping into the aetheric paths, I took hold of one, much the same way I did with the golden threads representing Fate.

“Good,” Haneul said. “Now, envision in your mind how every pathway is interconnected in a continuous loop, like the string of a cat’s cradle, running in and out of each point in space. Empower the rune you call Aroa’s Requiem and rip the string free.”

While maintaining focus on God Step, I split the output of my aether and channeled a stream to Aroa’s Requiem. Distantly, I could feel the ghost of the runes warming my back. Bright purple particles of aether ran down my arms and swarmed over my hands. Fixing my grip on the path, I heaved.

My arms bulged. Aether instinctively flooded them, and I pulled even harder. I began to tremble, but the path remained secure, not even bending beneath my strength.

“This isn’t a test of brute physical force but of insight,” Haneul patiently explained. “Your insight into this rune is incomplete, and your understanding of the path of aevum is limited. But you are entwined with one who is better aligned. Share this burden.”

Relaxing without releasing the path, I looked to Sylvie. She met my gaze with a serious nod, then dissolved into the silver sprite, which drifted into my core.

“Open your minds to one another,” Haneul continued once we were joined. “The dragon’s insight is imprinted on her spirit, not learned. She must open

herself to you completely for you to succeed."

I felt Sylvie trying to lay her mind bare, letting go of the barriers that we had both erected over the years to protect each other and ourselves, but it was not easy. *'Insight requires risk. Growth requires pain,'* she thought, then repeated it again. *'I am made from you, and you're made from me. I can bend the arrow of time's path, so you can too.'*

Slowly, I felt Sylvie's understanding bleed into me, one bright spark at a time.

The sudden image of her body dissolving into gold and lavender motes cut across my focus. *Sylv, are you okay?*

'I am,' she thought back, her voice rising from a fugue of fierce meditation. *'I can feel it, can't you? The pull of the insight. I passed through time itself, and time marked me. I'm not sure I understood what that meant before, but now…'*

Slowly, our minds melded, becoming as one. In that moment, the warped aetheric pathway in my grip moved, and when one moved, they all did. A thousand drooping strings tightened, and the entire network of connective points and paths flexed. I wasn't fully cognizant of whatever understanding Sylvie was sharing with me that was allowing this to happen, but Haneul had been right.

One by one, the points began to rip open.

Aether spilled through.

I kept pulling, ripping the gap wider and wider until—

The fabric of reality gave way.

I grabbed Regis, who dissolved and took shelter in my core with Sylvie as an eruption of aetheric force like nothing I had ever seen or could have imagined rolled across the desert. Sand lifted up into the air as the atmosphere boiled away, the foundations of the continent shattering far beneath me, unable to resist the force.

Somehow, I wasn't obliterated but instead floated up off the ground and into the air as the surge rolled endlessly past me. All I could do was watch from my ever-higher vantage as the explosion scoured the desert clean and cracked the world down to its core. The violet wave wiped Sapin clean next, then flattened the Grand Mountains. Soon, all of Dicathen was gone, lost beneath the violet ocean.

I floated free of the eruption, up and up, watching the aether swallow the oceans and then Alacrya before spilling freely into the emptiness of space beyond.

'Movement from order to disorder, form to formlessness. Pressure and proximity normalizing as the dissolution of structure. Entropy.' Sylvie's mentally projected voice was hollow. *'The natural progression of all things.'*

Haneul was gone, and the thread-woven form of Fate's aspect floated with me. "This is freedom. This is the absence of constraint. *This* is where your path takes you, Arthur-Grey. You are the key."

I turned toward the doll-like figure, my movements slow, my expression haunted. "All those moments where you poked and prodded me, making sure things turned out just so. *This* is what it was all for, what you're trying to accomplish?"

'Arthur, destroyer of his world, or keeper of the universe,' Regis thought darkly. *'Talk about perspective.'*

The aspect of Fate's blank face regarded me emotionlessly. "The wind does not seek to topple the tree. The ocean waves do not conspire to wear away the cliff face. The current state of reality is counter to the natural progression of this world. The moment your spirit entered your body, you became the instrument through which this would be corrected."

I waved weakly down to the demolished planet, still surrounded by the ever-expanding wave of aether. "But *this*? How is *this* better than what Kezess or Agrona have done?" I threw up my hands, nearly overcome with despair. And beneath it, a building rage. "No. No, this isn't the future. I deny it. I *refuse*."

“Of course,” the aspect of Fate said, dim golden light flickering along the threads binding its form. “Now. But this is the only path forward. And you will come to realize this in time. There is no limit to the number of times we might have this conversation. Eventually, you will live the perfect sequence of events that allows you to see the truth.”

I gaped at the doll-like form. “If I never leave the keystone, I can’t destroy the world.” My expression hardened into a fierce glare. “If necessary, I’ll stay here forever. The pocket dimension holding me will eventually collapse, and my body will decay and die, or Agrona will find me and kill me.”

“The possibilities are endless.” The glow flickered across the figure’s blank face, and I couldn’t help but think it was *smiling* at me. “But all eventualities lead to the breaking down of the barrier and the release of the aether back into the physical realm. And in every version, you are the lance that bursts the cyst.”

‘It can’t know that,’ Sylvie thought.

“Space, time, life. Together, these aspects of aether produce Fate. And Fate is the *act* of knowing, of aligning just so,” the aspect replied. “If I know, it is only because there is no other way the world could be.”

Regis scoffed, the noise running through me like a shiver up my back. *‘What a crock. This is total bullshit. Maybe the bits and pieces that have coagulated into Fate used to be alive, but this mouth, this aspect of Fate, doesn’t understand the living,’* Regis added.

‘It sees across time and space the way we look across a room,’ Sylvie said, continuing with Regis’s thought. *‘How many millions—billions, maybe—of lives lived and ended have come together to form Fate? It may be able to see forward and back in time to study cause and effect, but it doesn’t understand motivation, and it can’t value the individual. To something that has experienced so much death, such breadth of loss, us—our whole world—we’re just too small.’*

The silver sprite drifted free of my chest before manifesting beside me. “Is destroying all the life of this world a necessary part of returning everything to normal?”

“No, it is not necessary. It is natural. It is unavoidable. It is…not important.”

‘You’ve seen every future, every possible outcome?’ Regis asked, his mental projection turned directly to the aspect of Fate.

“Fate *is* every future, every possible outcome,” it answered calmly.

Below us, the world was gone. Whatever connection linked Dicathen with Epheotus was gone. The aetheric soup hid the distant stars, the sun, and the moon, making the sky indistinguishable from the aetheric realm.

“But you’re not infallible,” I said, my voice soft, my attention turned inward as I struggled for some counterpoint. Regardless of what I’d said, I had no intention of staying locked forever inside the keystone. “You can’t see everything—okay, maybe you can, but you can’t *understand* everything you see. When I arrived, you mistook the memories stored inside that crystal for my own.” My words came faster as I continued speaking. “You thought this Haneul, some ancient djinn who died long before I was ever reincarnated in this world, was somehow my *friend*, even though I’d never even seen or heard of him.”

The glow flickered sporadically up and down the thread-wound body. “But infallibility is not a necessary component of success in reaching a state of natural equilibrium. Failure in action is how the world evolves, a natural component of entropic decay.”

I closed my eyes and pressed my palms against them in frustration. The conversation was infuriating. There had to be a way forward, but—

I gasped, realization hitting me like ice-cold water. We were half in the physical realm, and I had effortlessly been able to reach for my godrunes.

Aether released from my core and traveled along the channels I had forged in the lava pits of the Relictombs to my back, imbuing the rune there.

My mind sparked to life, my focus splitting into several splintered directions at once. *King’s Gambit.* The dull fatigue and brain fog I had experienced earlier were gone. I was close enough to my body to utilize the godrune normally. Immediately, my mind began chasing along several different possible arguments simultaneously, shedding the anger, frustration,

and dismay I had felt and cocooning itself in the cold comfort of reason and factual evidence.

A single gold thread followed each thought. With every consideration, Fate was there, watching the line of thought play out. No matter how many thoughts I held at once, the threads of Fate were woven into every one.

There was a necessary sequence to events, and I laid them out in the necessary order as I began attempting to solve each step. Like the aetheric pathways connecting into and through both the physical realm and the aetheric void, however, each step connected to the next in a loop. I couldn't accomplish any individual goal—such as escaping the keystone with insight into Fate—without knowing how to accomplish what came before and after.

The golden threads acted like a compass. Instead of Fate examining my thoughts, I used these threads of Fate to pull individual frames of my own split mind forward or back into time, not only considering the many different possibilities but actively searching through them using the keystone's ability to forge entire worlds and timelines.

In the many different spotlights of my mind's eye, I saw dozens, even hundreds of possible conversations with Fate unfold, playing through each simultaneously and in its entirety. I mentally manifested just as many battles against Agrona and Kezess, searching for an effective plan to scour them both from the world without inadvertently destroying it. Finding a solution to the problem they presented was in turn required to even consider the act of releasing the pressure of the aetheric realm and putting our world back on its proper trajectory of growth, because any attempt to do so relied entirely on the results of the first two events. Despite my best efforts to explore potential solutions to the release of the aether, the results of any specific sequence of cause and effect was dramatically altered by how I resolved the previous situations, creating a cyclical loop of endless destruction in which even King's Gambit struggled to find meaning.

There was no sense of time's passage, only the unfolding of so many possibilities.

It was only at a brush of a finger across my face that I snapped back into some sense of myself, separate from the ever-expanding, ever-branching

sequence of my many disparate trains of thought.

Sylvie was hovering in the void in front of me. She looked down at her hand, which was streaked with blood. I licked my lips and tasted salt and iron.

“Arthur, your nose…” Sylvie said a moment later.

I tried to focus aether toward the bloody nose. My core didn’t respond.

Dozens of separate branches of thought collided together by ones and twos, each collision sending a spike of pain through my skull. It was a struggle to collect enough focus to look inward.

My core was empty, the last of my aether burning away as fuel for my godrunes, all of which glowed warm and gold from my back.

My eyes fluttered, and I felt myself sagging. A strong arm wrapped around me, holding me in place despite our floating freely in emptiness.

‘Hey, chief, you need to absorb some of this aether,’ Regis encouraged me, his bright and wakeful mind sending hot embers of pain down the base of my skull.

‘He can’t…’ Sylvie’s fear sent tremors up my spine. *‘It’s his real core that’s empty!’*

Their thoughts faded in and out. I couldn’t process them, couldn’t keep track of which thoughts were mine or theirs. Was King’s Gambit still active? My brain felt as if it had been cut into a hundred pieces, like those old scientific displays on Earth that were just thin slices of a person, each layer pressed into glass and set out for the world to see…

The world couldn’t see my brain. But the threads of Fate could. Fate had been with me, entangled with every single considered course, every theorized sequence of events. Those golden threads were wound through every branching thought I’d had.

The golden threads weren’t the compass, I thought with the last vestige of sense I had. *I was the compass*.

Darkness took me, swallowing my mind and my thoughts, and even the entangling golden threads.

Through the closed lids of my eyes, within the vast black emptiness, a small dot of light appeared in the distance. The light grew closer, brighter, and then turned into a bright blur, forcing me to shut my eyes. Indiscernible sounds assaulted my ears. When I tried to speak, the words came out as a cry.

52

ONE LAST WORD

CECILIA

The sound of Agrona's quick, confident steps blocked out all other noise in the halls of Taegrin Caelum. My own stride felt dragged along, timid even, as I floundered in his wake. At my side, Nico walked blindly, his eyes on me, not paying attention to where his steps fell. Twice, he stumbled on an unexpected stair, but still, his eyes pressed into the side of my face like two iron pokers hot from the fire.

His fingers clenched and unclenched as his teeth gnawed on the inside of his lip. Several times, he opened his mouth, looked at Agrona's back, closed his mouth again, and returned to chewing his lip. He couldn't have made it more obvious that he needed to tell me something if he'd etched the fact in runes across his forehead, but he clearly couldn't speak freely in front of Agrona.

Whatever it is, it's going to have to wait, I thought, my own gaze settling on Agrona's back. *We're going to Dicathen. To kill Grey.*

Tessia had buried herself down deep. Throughout my conversation with Agrona, I had felt flickers of her emotions—mostly the relief she felt every time Ji-ae had failed to locate Grey—but she was keeping her thoughts from me.

So much has happened so quickly. Tessia had released me from Grey's trap, allowing me to escape the Relictombs and return to Agrona. I tried not to think about the promise I had made to her. *Is that why you're silent now? Regret?*

There was no response, but I didn't expect one.

We reached a teleportation chamber that I had never visited before. I knew we were still in Agrona's private wing, so I assumed this was his personal tempus warp.

The octagonal chamber was small when compared to the larger sitting rooms, studies, and other such spaces that made up the parts of his private wing that I had seen. Light beamed down from an angled ceiling to highlight a tempus warp resting on a granite pillar in the center of the room. Even as we entered, the tempus warp activated, runes burning brightly along its sides. Though having the same roughly anvil-shaped form, Agrona's tempus warp was silvery smooth and larger than most I had seen.

"Gather round," he said perfunctorily, moving to the far side.

Nico stood to his left and I to his right. Deep inside me, my guts seemed to squiggle around, and I couldn't be sure if the nerves I felt were my own or Tessia's leaking into me.

Agrona provided no warning as the three of us were suddenly pulled out of Taegrin Caelum and carried across the face of the world. There was a distant sensation of passage, but the transition was so smooth as to be almost uncomfortable, creating an uncanny valley of movement. When my feet sank into ankle-length grass, I actually stumbled.

Nico grabbed me tighter than necessary and peered at me with worry. "Cecil? Are you—"

"I'm fine," I said, easing my arm out of his hands and looking around us.

We had appeared on the edge of a small stand of trees. In front of us, there was a cluster of rocks that formed a narrow cave entrance. I searched for any interruption of the mana that hinted at Grey's presence, but there was nothing. "Are you sure he's here? Could Ji-ae have been wrong?"

The ornaments in his horns jangled slightly as Agrona looked at me, his brows raised incredulously. “Cecil, dear, don’t be a fool.”

I blanched, making Agrona smile as he turned away and started toward the rocks.

Nico took my hand, his eyes smoldering as they burned into Agrona’s back. He waited a moment, letting Agrona get a few steps ahead, then leaned toward me. “I need to—”

“Come along,” Agrona said, his smooth baritone vibrating in my chest.

I squeezed Nico’s hand, then pulled away and hurried after Agrona. I sensed Nico’s pause before he followed hesitantly.

Agrona stepped into the crack in the rocks and floated slowly down into the darkness beyond. Just before he left my sight, he looked back up at me, and his gaze grabbed me like a leash. Without a second thought, I stepped in after him. For a second, I plunged down into the darkness, but the falling sensation evaporated as I grabbed hold of myself with the mana and began slowly drifting after him.

I landed on rough, bare rock. A second later, Nico alighted beside me. Before us was a barren cavern. The only noticeable feature was the remains of a huge throne. It had been shattered, and the fragments scattered across the cavern floor. Still, I sensed no disruption in the mana, no telltale signs of an aetheric presence. To all my senses, the cave was empty.

“I turned this place inside out looking for hidden tunnels or chambers,” Nico said.

“Mundane,” Agrona muttered. Resting his hands on his hips, he stared up toward the very center of the cave. As far as I could tell, he was staring at nothing. “Don’t worry yourself about it, little Nico. It isn’t your fault. After all, Arthur is just…so very much smarter than you.”

Nico flinched as if he’d been struck and looked at his feet. I felt like I should intervene, but my mind was too busy with the puzzle of Grey’s hiding place. “So how do we find this…pocket dimension? Isn’t that what Ji-ae called it?”

“The aspect of aether called spatium is, as one might expect, quite adept at manipulating physical space,” Agrona said, his tone changing. Instead of the cold, goading sarcasm, he sounded like an eager professor explaining a favored topic. “Such pocket dimensions have all kinds of uses. The extradimensional storage artifacts so commonly used throughout both continents were designed based on a similar premise. Of course, the djinn could do many things that are, today, seen by most as impossible.”

Agrona walked in a circle around the cavern, his eyes always focused on the same point. “When bound into an item with runes, such spaces are relatively stable. But when projected as such…” Agrona stopped pacing and took a few steps back. Although he stood in a relaxed posture, waves of dark mana began to radiate forward from him. Dark striations appeared in the air as his mana disrupted that in the atmosphere, scattering it throughout the cavern.

A transparent, ethereal bubble became visible, revealed by the waves of mana. It shimmered with an internal light that was somehow contrary to the dark mana bombarding it. It was small, only a few feet across, and hovered fifteen feet in the air. Only then, looking at it with so much mana highlighting it, did I sense the distortion that might have revealed its presence.

One part of me was embarrassed that I had failed to sense it before, while another was amazed—and a little afraid—that Ji-ae had found it from across the ocean and with the Alacryan search forces so far away.

I was also curious about how easily Agrona seemed to identify and manipulate it, but as it all worked together, it also reinforced just how unfair Agrona’s jab at Nico had been. *How could Agrona expect Nico to sense it when even I couldn’t?* I glanced at Nico and realized he was still watching me, not examining the dimensional pocket. I gave him a small, apologetic smile, hoping that he understood.

The mana issuing from Agrona intensified. Lashes of void wind struck the bubble over and over again, growing slowly stronger. The edges of the bubble were fraying, and space seemed to warp strangely around it, bending and twisting the mana.

“Stand back,” Agrona said suddenly, gesturing with his hand.

Nico and I quickly shuffled away from where the jagged lines of dark mana crashed into the transparent bubble, each lash striking with more power.

With a rush of air, the bubble popped. Inside was…difficult to understand. A three-dimensional space several times larger than the bubble had been folded up inside it. I saw the space that had been hidden within as if looking at it through a warped lens, its proportions entirely out of whack, the physical attributes making it up losing all meaning except for the presence of a soft glow.

Further confusing the sight was the fact that it was rapidly unfolding itself as it spilled out into the cavern, transitioning from the pocket dimension back into normal space like a ship's sail unfurling.

With the grinding of stone and a sluggish splashing noise, the hidden space settled in the center of the cave. Glowing liquid sloshed back and forth in a small pool, partially hidden by a pinkish mist that surrounded the pool in smooth panels like walls. Even as we watched, the mist began to disperse.

Sitting in the pool, his eyes closed, was Grey. A girl with his same wheat-blond hair sat across from him: Sylvie, his dragon bond.

A dark cuboid relic floated in the air between them, snapping and sparking with violet jolts of aether.

Both had their eyes closed. Neither moved as the pool water settled, the gentle sloshing against their clothes ceasing.

They don’t even know we’re here, I thought. Despite being buried deep within me, Tessia trembled.

Nico swallowed heavily as he stepped up beside me, his eyes locked on Grey. Once, I’m sure he would have already been in motion, blood iron bearing down on Grey’s undefended neck. Now, though, I couldn’t read his expression.

The soles of Agrona’s boots crunched against the dirt-covered floor as he approached the pool gingerly. Surprisingly, his dark eyes were entirely on the girl. Once at its edge, he kneeled and reached out, his fingers just barely

brushing a lock of her hair. “Daughter,” he said, his lips carefully enunciating the word that he only barely whispered.

Suddenly, he stood. His fists clenched, and the mana around him seemed to pull away in fright. “Such a waste. Such a *disappointment*.” He looked away and started to turn his back on her but, as if being grabbed by some external force, stopped and looked back. “You think like a lesser, daughter. Short-sighted and desperate. Your mother’s act—bonding you to a lesser like some common beast—destroyed your potential.” He shook his head, and his fists unclenched.

With a sigh, he finally turned away, and his eyes, their color lost within the reflection of the light from the pool, locked onto mine. “Kill her, Cecil dear. Take her mana, and then we can decide what to do with your old friend Grey.”

I froze. The effort to look away from Agrona to Sylvie—*his daughter*—felt herculean. I had tasted her pure mana before. At the time, I had wanted dearly to absorb every drop from her. What insights into mana, or even aether, would a full, healthy, powerful dragon’s reservoir of mana provide me?

And yet my focus turned inward, searching down deep to where Tessia lay. I had been waiting for her protestations from the moment Grey and his bond appeared, and yet she had been silent.

She stirred as she felt my attention turn to her. *‘I am in your thoughts, Cecilia. You already know what I would say, because you feel the same way.’*

I flinched back from the mental contact as if she’d struck me. *After everything, that’s all you have to say? Why bind me to a promise if you’re not going to call it due?*

She didn’t respond.

I swallowed uncomfortably. A slight rise of Agrona’s brow forced my focus back to him.

This was an unfair request. She was his daughter, and she was defenseless. It was cruel to ask me to absorb her mana. *If she has to die here, why does it*

have to be by my hand?

Another, deeper, more frightened part of me acknowledged something else. *She is his daughter, and he is willing to spend her life this easily.* The truth was, hadn't I tried to see Agrona like a father figure? Hadn't I tried to *be* a daughter to him? *I never had a family on Earth. Just Nico.* And Grey, I acknowledged with some difficulty. *And Headmaster Wilbeck, who was always kind to me.*

"Cecil dear…" Agrona prodded, a dangerous edge in his voice.

"I can't," I said around the lump in my throat. "I'm sorry, Agrona. Please, don't ask me to do this."

Agrona took a step toward me. His face was impassive, as blank as if it were carved of marble. "You are the Legacy, Cecilia. The path before you will be replete with demanding obligations. You cannot balk at each one, needing me to hold your hand throughout. Our wills—*your will*—must be absolute."

My jaw worked silently as Agrona held my gaze. I couldn't look away from him. "I will fight your battles for you. I will destroy your enemies. I will master every aspect of asuran magic, and I will make the world kneel, if that's what you wish." I let out a shaky breath. My legs felt like jelly, and my guts squirmed like fire eels. "But please don't make me do this."

"This is your line?" Agrona's stony visage cracked, but it did not shatter. He looked into the middle distance between us and gave a soft huff of something like laughter but very much not. The motion made the ornaments in his horns tinkle softly. "After all the deaths you have caused, this is where you decide not to kill? What sort of inconsistent logic bars you from killing my daughter? Is it her tie to Arthur? Or…her relationship with me? No. You are afraid of what might happen to *you*, knowing that I could do this to my own flesh and blood."

"No…yes. All of it. I…" I looked inward to Tessia, wishing she would beg me not to kill Sylvie or Arthur. "I won't do this."

Agrona scoffed, a bitterly cutting noise. "Be careful, Cecilia. You see what happens to those who disappoint me." He gestured delicately to the

immobile girl in the pool.

Nico stepped in front of me and held up the charwood staff he had designed, its four differently colored crystals gleaming dully. “Enough!” His voice was higher than usual, and there was sweat on his brow. “After all she’s done for you…after everything! You don’t get to threaten her, Agrona.”

My heart gave a strange pitter-pattering jump in my chest, and I yearned to reach out and wrap my arms around Nico, pulling him to me and keeping him safe. But then Agrona began to laugh. The sound of his wild amusement echoed off the walls and rooted me to the spot.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think, and I figured it out,” Nico continued, his voice shaking almost as much as the staff in his hands. He was still looking at Agrona, but I knew he was talking to me. “The table, the runes, the energy transference, all of it.”

Agrona’s laugh petered out, and he wiped a single tear from his cheek. He gave Nico a predatory smile. “Oh, go on. You’ve clearly been dying to have your big moment, hero.”

Stumbling, Nico began to explain. I struggled to follow all the technical details. Still, the purpose was clear enough: the artifact table, in conjunction with the runes marking my body, worked to transfer magical abilities from one person to another.

Tentatively, I reached out and touched Nico’s shoulder, and he stopped speaking and turned to look at me with desperate hope. “Nico…he already told me. I’m sorry. I know.”

His brows knit together in confusion, and his mouth worked silently. Finally, he said, “No, you don’t understand—”

“Yes, you’ve caught me!” Agrona said, raising his hands as if preparing for them to be manacled. “Amazing detective work, Scythe Nico. You have realized that I have backup plans. What a terrible shock for you, I know.”

Nico turned fully toward me now, setting one hand on my shoulder and leaning toward me until our faces almost touched. “It’s not some emergency option, Cecil. It’s the *entire plan*. He can *take* the Legacy from you. All that

potential, all that knowledge…insight into all the other asuras' mana arts, everything." Nico's grip tightened, and his eyes shone with anger and fear. "He's never going to send us home. It's all a lie. Everything."

Behind Nico, Agrona rolled his eyes. "As usual, Nico, you fail to see what is right in front of your face. Do you think you and Cecilia can return to Earth and live a cozy, happy little life if she is still the Legacy?"

Nico spun back to Agrona, again brandishing the staff. "You've pushed me and taunted me and belittled me. Fostered my anger while taking everything else away from me, baiting me along in your service with promises of bringing Cecilia here and then sending us back to Earth to have a life together. You never stopped moving the goalposts to ensure that nothing—*nothing!*—was ever enough for you. But this…this is the line *I* won't cross. I won't let you do this to Cecilia!"

I looked back and forth between the two. Agrona had already told me what he and those mages were doing when I woke from my Integration, and based on what Nico was saying, it seemed as if he'd been truthful. But Nico was frightened…and angry. I'd never seen him stand up to Agrona before, and to know that he was risking Agrona's wrath to defend me…

"Enough," Agrona said, any hint of humor in his demeanor vanishing between one heartbeat and the next. A cold wind whipped through the cave, throwing dust in our faces. His eyes gleamed an angry scarlet as he looked past Nico to me. "Cecilia. I am tired of this game. Absorb this failure of an asura's mana now. Kill her or…watch Nico die instead."

My ears filled with a terrible ringing. A heavy pressure seemed to descend onto my chest, crushing the air from my lungs.

Somehow, Nico seemed unaffected. His staff cut through the air, conjuring a shield of all four elements gusting, flaring, and swirling into and through one another. He spoke, and although I recognized the words as defiant, I couldn't process them beyond the drumbeat in my skull. I wanted to stop him, to protect him, to beg Agrona to understand, but I felt like I had been turned to stone.

From deep down inside my very being, I felt a sensation like wiggling my bare toes in cool grass. *'It's okay, Cecilia. I'm here. You know what is right,*

and you have the strength to do it.'

As I leaned into those words, truly appreciating Tessia for the first time since my reincarnation, something hot and wet sprayed across my face. Only as a kind of echo, I realized there had been a surge of mana.

Slowly, my gaze fell, from the flickering lights within the gemstones inset in Nico's staff to his tangled black hair, and then down his neck and shoulders. There, my focus caught, snagging on what I saw, but I was unable to process it.

Nico collapsed to his knees.

The shield cracked, the elements splintering and turning against each other as the magic in the air faded.

To either side, Nico held one half of his staff in each hand.

I saw all this in a detached sort of way, peripheral to the focus of my gaze, which remained on Nico's back, just below his shoulder blades, where a black spike of blood iron had erupted from him. Dozens of smaller spikes burst out from the blood that ran down the black metal, and even more spikes grew from those, each one tipped with a drop of blood. These drops rained down like petals from a rosebush to pool beneath him.

My hand raised, brushing against my face. It was the act of looking down to find my own skin red with Nico's blood that finally snapped me out of the otherworldly fugue.

I drew in a ragged, desperate breath and threw myself onto my knees at Nico's side just as he began to pitch forward. Scooping him into my arms, I eased him down onto the ground. "Nico. Nico! Nico…" His name kept tumbling from my lips, my inflection changing each time, almost as if I were uttering the chant to a spell.

His dark eyes turned to me, glossy with pain. His lips moved, but no sound came out, and I was too dull with shock to read them. His gaze flicked up and away from me, and I followed it, looking up into Agrona's face just as his fingers tangled in the gunmetal gray hair I had always hated. With a fistful of my hair, Agrona jerked me up onto my feet and dragged me toward the pool. I thought I was screaming, but I wasn't sure.

With a shove, I pitched forward onto my hands and knees beside Sylvie, almost landing in the pool with her and Grey. Red spilled into the liquid, slowly tinging the bluish light an angry purple.

“Kill her,” Agrona said coldly, his murderous intent pressing down on me so I couldn’t rise.

Turning my head, I looked up into his face. There was no sign of the man who had brought me to this world, who had given me the strength and the confidence to dare for a new chance at life, in Agrona’s expectant but emotionless gaze. Now, just like the researchers of my old world, he looked at me as if there was no doubt that he would break me. I would do his will as I always had. This was just another test.

I closed my eyes against the pain that clutched my rapidly beating heart like venomous claws. Accepting what it would mean, I uttered one last, unexpectedly liberating, word.

"No."

53

PROVIDENCE

ARTHUR LEYWIN

Through the cacophony of indistinguishable sounds, I heard a muffled voice.

“Kill her.”

“No.”

A bright blur in the heart of darkness. The bitter backdrop for the echoes of ten thousand splintered aspects of a mind pushed beyond the edge of capability, of sanity.

Against the back of my closed eyelids, aether seeped like blood from the pores between worlds. Interposed over this image was another: golden threads stretching beyond the bounds of one world and into the next, through a rift, reaching far and wide as they spread from the nexus point that was a single man, a man whose hands were red with the blood of civilization after civilization. In the image, I cut the cords of Fate and watched an empire fall. In the image, I looked down at my own hands, and they were red like his.

Not like that. I cast the vision aside. A small dot of light was growing behind it.

I tried to speak. The words came out as a cry.

Another image. One I considered harder, longer: me, a crown of light above my brow, the threads of Fate wrapped around me like armor, Agrona powerless against me. In the vision, I struck him down ten different ways, and yet each Fateful blow reverberated across time and space to ensure failure and destruction, and ten different visions within the vision collapsed around me. Me, standing at the epicenter of failure.

I cast the image aside with some difficulty.

The light grew closer, brighter.

I pondered the last vision, the only way. It was a door I could open but not see beyond. But it was the only way.

The visions melted into a bright blur. I tried to close my eyes, but they were already shut.

Indiscernible sounds battered my ears.

“Kill her.”

“No.”

“Arthur-Grey.”

Lightning behind my eyes. Breath trapped in my lungs. A world written in fire, seen through closed lids.

My eyes snapped open, and a weak cry escaped my lips.

I saw myself from above, a mind out of body. I was sitting cross-legged in the pool of aether-rich liquid, which rippled slightly and cast an uneven blue-purple light across the interior of the large underground cavern where Sylvia had hidden so long ago. Beside me, Sylvie sat in an identical position. Her face was scrunched into a tight frown, her eyes still closed, the lids moving as the eyeballs below raced back and forth, as if she were having a tortured dream.

There was no emotion in what I saw before me. The scene was still too detached from me, too distant and unreal.

Tessia—*no, Cecilia*—was on her hands and knees next to the pool. Her gunmetal hair hung down in front of her face. Almond-shaped teal eyes narrowed, glowering through the silvery strands at the man standing above her. Blood pooled around her fingers and spilled into the pool, staining the dimming blue light.

I didn't have to search for the source to know it wasn't her blood, but my eyes still flicked to Nico. Each faint beat of his dying heart sent more of what little blood he had left pouring from the unearthly, branching black spike that protruded from his back.

Neither did I need to guess at how this had come about. The mana that had conjured the fatal spell still floated around Agrona, barely controlled. He had already forgotten Nico, I knew. His entire will was bent on Cecilia as he matched her glowering stare with a look of cruel, expectant command.

Many golden threads ran between the three. Those around Nico were beginning to snap one by one. Most led from him to Cecilia, wrapping around her, and fewer to Agrona. A couple of threads bound Nico to me, but these were trembling with tension, ready to break.

While few threads connected Nico and Agrona, Agrona himself radiated more than I could count.

And yet I was covered in even more golden threads than the others. Wrapped around every inch of my body so that I was nearly hidden beneath them, the golden threads connected me to all the others, and then spread out into the wider world, just like Agrona. So thickly were the threads wound, that I almost looked like—

"Arthur-Grey."

Through the woven threads, dimly glowing around me like the wrappings of an ancient, mummified king, I saw it. The aspect of Fate, in and around me, bound to me, sitting just behind and above me—not in three-dimensional space, but in time and the pressed layers of the fabric of the universe that separated the physical world and the aetheric realm in which it was trapped.

“I accept the vision of the future you have offered as also being within the natural order, the necessary advance of the arrow of time,” the aspect continued, its voice only for my ears. “But I offer also a warning.”

My vision retracted even further, pulling back through the roof of the cavern and the soil above it into open air. Instead of looking down on the Beast Glades, I was above Etistin, just like in the visions Fate had shown me of the past.

Now, it showed me the future.

Just like before, white blurs representing the dragons arrived, and Etistin as I knew it was wiped from the face of Sapin. The bay looked lonely and forlorn without the city looking down on it, but time sped by, and soon a new civilization was building there. The simple structures they constructed did not last long before they too were wiped out. The speed of the vision seemed to be increasing, so that I only saw flashes of each new city being built before it was destroyed.

I withdrew further, until the entire world was only a distant bit of color against an expansive dark sky, empty except for the distant stars. All the wide universe was laid out before me in exaggerated colors, the stars bright pinpricks of light against a swirling, oil-on-water backdrop of purples, blues, and grays.

And humming just beneath the surface, pressing against the walls of reality, was the building pressure of the aetheric realm. A consistent rhythm began to pulse outward from the aetheric realm like a heartbeat, and with each pulse, the stars brightened and bulged. The beats grew stronger, faster, and I suddenly understood what was about to happen.

As if my understanding had conjured it into existence, the world ruptured. It was like the vision I had seen before—the future Fate was attempting to conjure into being through me—but the resulting cataclysm didn’t occur on a global scale.

It was with a deep, vague horror that I watched as the aetheric explosion spilled across the sky, wiping away the stars and leaving behind only an endless void.

The scene faded away, and I was once again looking down on myself and the aspect of Fate sitting within and around me.

With the fading of the vision, my horror faded as well. What it left behind was like a distant dream only half-remembered in the deep dark of the night. One that none-the-less stops the dreamer from returning to sleep for fear that the nightmare will resurface.

“Kill her.” The cold words issued from Agrona, and he pressed down on Cecilia with his murderous intent, pinning her to the ground on all fours.

She closed her eyes, her pain written in the golden threads that connected them. Two by two, the threads connecting her to Agrona were snapping and fizzling away to nothing.

Through gritted teeth, she uttered a single word. “No.”

My eyes snapped open, and a weak cry escaped my lips.

Agrona’s head began to turn toward me, his intent sharpening into a killing blade. Crouching at his feet, Cecilia’s eyes shifted to me, and through them I saw down deep into the heart of her, where a trembling Tessia uncurled and reached outward. Knots of golden thread strung back and forth between the two, a muddy, chaotic mess of past and future tying them together.

Another thread connecting Nico to Cecilia snapped, and I sensed that the breath leaving his lungs was the last he would breathe in this world.

“Nico!”

The pool erupted into commotion as, beside me, Sylvie burst upright. Her hands flung out, and a silvery, half-formed shield began to wrap around me.

The scythe of Agrona’s intent struck it, and it burst with a sound like a bell. Sylvie was lifted up, her body spinning sickeningly through the air.

Warmth spilled into my empty core as Regis desperately expelled all his own aether, forcing it through the gates around my core. Strength ran through my channels like lava, burning and inexorable.

Agrona rebounded back from Sylvie’s shield, stumbling a step.

Beside him, Cecilia rose.

Just as Fate hovered above and behind me like a golden shadow, a silver shadow rose with Cecilia. Emerald vines writhed through the silver light as Cecilia and Tessia stood together. The knotted golden threads binding them were unwinding. Not breaking, but unspooling, each frayed knot coming undone and straightening rapidly.

The silver shadow that was Tessia raised her arm. Half a heartbeat later, Cecilia did the same.

Emerald vines erupted from Tessia, snapping through the air between her and Agrona. They slammed into him, knocking him back another half a step and clutching at his wrists and horns.

Cecilia’s hand tightened into a fist, and the threads around her flexed and vibrated, pulsing with golden light. Her jaw worked, her eyes closed, and tears leaked from them. Her hand fell an inch.

Agrona scoffed, and Cecilia was lifted off the ground. She hurtled into the air until her back slammed against the cavern roof, losing a hail of small stones, and then she fell to the ground, landing heavily in front of me. A dozen threads or more snapped and burned away between Cecilia and Agrona.

The silver shadow that was Tessia was gone, dragged back into the prison of her body.

Agrona’s scarlet eyes lingered on Cecilia, his lips curling into a disappointed grimace.

I raised my hand. Agrona’s eyes shifted to me, widening.

Many threads still bound Cecilia and Agrona. The purple motes of Aroa’s Requiem gathered around my hand, and I pinched down on the golden bundle, shearing through the threads of Fate as if they were no more than spun wool.

A shockwave rolled away in both directions from the cut, slamming into Agrona and spilling over Cecilia’s prone form, tossing her into the pool at my feet.

Agrona stumbled and fell, going to one knee. His eyes lost focus, and in the rippling of space and time I saw the burning away of all potential futures in which Agrona was able to use the Legacy as a weapon, in the form of Cecilia or as his own power. The shockwave continued to jolt through him, striking him again and again as each potential future collapsed in his mind.

Leaning forward, I pulled Cecilia toward me, holding her face-up on the surface of the dense liquid, now depleted of aether and casting a weak purple light. Many threads still connected her to the wider world. I reached for them next, but the godrune at my back flickered painfully, and the purple motes clinging to my hand began to fade.

Reaching into the emptiness around me, I grabbed hold of the relic armor.

Black scales began to fold into existence over my skin as the armor formed, spreading out from my chest to cover the rest of my body.

But as the armor spread, brilliant white plates and ridges started forming over it, growing into pauldrons and greaves over top the black scales. Heavy plated boots melded seamlessly into the greaves, and delicate gauntlets grew around my hands between my skin and Cecilia’s in my arms.

I had no time to consider the implication of this change, and, as the armor began drawing in aether from the surrounding atmosphere, I turned my attention to absorbing what I could. My hold over Aroa’s Requiem grew firm, and I again reached for the golden threads extending from Cecilia.

Time seemed to stutter. Beneath me, the blood-stained pool exploded upward, forming into swords, axes, and spears. Black-lined wind struck me like a battering ram, and I pulled Cecilia closer to me, shielding her as best I could. The wind began to pick up the weapons and spin them, leaving me at the center of a deadly vortex.

As the liquid swords and axes struck me, the armor pulled at my meager aetheric reservoir, fighting to reform as each blow ripped it apart piece by piece.

Through the storm of swords, I met Agrona’s eyes, now the color of clotted blood.

With a shaking hand, I reached for the golden threads. My fingers closed around a handful of the threads of Fate, and the aether bit into them.

Again, shockwaves rolled along the strings, spreading out across the entirety of the world. I felt each one, saw behind my eyes a hundred different cascading effects as the lives of Alacryans and Dicathians everywhere were changed forever. My legs trembled and my arms shook under the weight of it.

The vortex subsided, the conjured weapons splashing back down into the pool, now stained with my own blood as well. Agrona was on his hands and knees, his body heaving with every breath, his face a grimace of pain and desperate perseverance.

Only a few threads remained around Cecilia, while the golden lines radiating from Agrona were uncountable. I had seen so many possibilities in the keystone when searching for the way forward so that Fate would free me of its bonds. I didn't know what I'd have done if I'd faced this moment before. Even now, it was a difficult decision to make, to accept. It felt wrong. It felt *unfair*.

There was no thread spreading out from Agrona that I could cut that would result in a victory here. No blow I could strike against him directly would bring about a world in which the future I had shown to Fate could come to pass.

I looked back at Cecilia. Her eyes fluttered open. There was no hint of Tessia in them; she had exhausted her strength and was buried deep underneath the stronger spirit of the Legacy, bound by Agrona's magic and the spellforms drawn into her flesh.

Another thread between Tessia and Nico fizzled out. Only a single thin golden line remained.

Mana was starting to leak from Nico's core and rising from his skin like steam.

Some wills were stronger than others. Certain visions of the future were so potent that they rewrote probability and potential, forcing reality to shift in order to manifest that future into being. *That*, I now knew, was the truth

about how one altered Fate: through action and will and unassailable belief. It was not another power to be manipulated or controlled. The keystones had never been about *controlling* Fate, only about understanding it. But through understanding, it could still be influenced.

But it hadn't only been *my* will that had influenced Fate.

"I'm sorry," I said, and all my many regrets about how I'd handled everything between us came spilling out with those two words.

Cecilia said nothing, only stared back at me. There was no desperation in her gaze, no hope, no fear. It wasn't trust, either. As I looked into those teal eyes, I saw only acceptance. She knew this was her end, and she no longer had the strength to fight it.

I didn't acknowledge my own feelings. I felt guilt for my own actions, but I did not feel as though Cecilia or Nico had earned my mercy. Neither of my former friends had been granted a fair life, neither on Earth nor on this world, and I didn't blame them for that. But both had chosen to treat this place—this life, this entire world—as if it didn't matter. While Earth was little more than a bad dream to me, it had become their fixation, both past and future, and they had treated my world—my *family*—as a meaningless stepping stone to move from one life on Earth to the next.

I didn't acknowledge my own feelings. But if I did, I knew I would find bitterness, and anger. And hatred. I didn't acknowledge my own feelings because there was no room to react emotionally. I couldn't repeat their mistakes by letting the past destroy an opportunity for a better future. They didn't deserve my mercy, and they certainly hadn't earned redemption.

But punishing them wasn't important either. Not in the grand scheme of things. Fate had shown me that.

A roar shook the cavern, and more stones and dust fell from above. Out of the shadows, purple light dancing across black scales, Sylvie swooped over us. The earth shook as her claw came down around Agrona, pinning him.

A scythe of transparent black mana carved through the pool beside me, nearly taking off my arm and Cecilia's head.

I reached for a golden thread that led from Cecilia up through the ceiling of the cave. I took hold of it, but I didn't cut it. Instead, I channeled Aroa's Requiem *into* it, empowering the potential and conjuring a resonant hum through the thread that spread out in both directions. All the other threads around Cecilia began to release, snapping like spider silk and turning to golden light and then to nothing but distant, inaccessible possibility.

The last of the knots binding Cecilia to Tessia unwound. When the knots were gone, these threads too faded.

Only two remained: the empowered thread, vibrating out into the universe, and the fraying thread connecting her to Nico, who had already breathed his last breath on this world. The last of his mana drifted free of his core and then out through his mana veins. A knot of bright amethyst motes of energy floated out after the mana.

A single golden thread, tentative and flickering, extended back to Cecilia.

"Go," I said, my voice hoarse and weak.

Tears leaked from Cecilia's eyes, and her lip began to tremble. For a moment, I saw neither Cecilia in Tessia's body nor Tessia herself. Instead, I saw the orphan girl who struggled to make friends for fear of hurting them. With only a slight nod, she turned her gaze along the path of the thread. Although I knew she couldn't see it, she could *feel* its pull her on.

Her eyes rolled back, and the essence of her being burned bright within the golden light of the thread of Fate—this one tying her back to Earth. The aetheric motes that had risen from Nico dissolved into the thread as well, and together, two small purple lights ascended through the gold. Behind them, the string melted away.

The final shockwave erupted from Agrona, tossing Sylvie away as if her draconic form weighed no more than a dry fall leaf. The force of the wave crashed out along the threads of Fate connecting Agrona to the world, and my mind was ripped from the cave along with it.

I saw the Beast Glades beneath a rippling portal in the sky. Devices of obvious Alacryan design surrounded the rift, cutting it off from the world and hammering it with waves of disruptive force. Dozens of Wraiths floated

in the air within the shield that protected them from the small army of dragons outside.

The shockwave rolled along the golden threads until it struck the Wraiths and Instillers like a physical blow. Like insects in a hurricane, they were swatted from the air.

When the first Wraith crashed into one of the shield-generating artifacts, sparks flew from the device and the shield began to flicker. Then a second, third, and fourth Wraith landed among the fragile equipment, and an explosion rocked the Alacryan fortification. Starting first at a single point, the shield surrounding them began to collapse inward. The hole grew wider and wider until it was larger than the shield itself, and then the shield was gone.

The dragons hovered on the edges, staring in shock. Charon, floating at the front in his scarred dragon form, gave a bellowing shout, and the dragons descended on the prone Alacryans.

At the same time, across the continent, another shockwave struck hundreds of imprisoned Alacryans. Screams erupted in their cells, echoing out through the underground city. Backs arched as people threw themselves on the ground, clawing at spellforms and cores. I saw among them Corbett Denoir and the warrior Arian, Caera’s protector, but also the young Highblood from Xyrus, Augustine Ramseyer, and many others I was familiar with.

I saw as Seth Milview and Mayla from Maerin town clung to each other, their faces twisted with pain and fear as they shook against the impact. Seris, Lyra Dreide, and Caera moved among them, seeming to be the only three of all the Alacryans not crippled with the colliding force of changing Fate.

Elsewhere, I rode the shockwave as it sped over Etistin. It found Scythe Melzri as she searched through the carnage of a horrible frozen battlefield. The Scythe bent down to check for signs of life from a pale-skinned woman with short white hair—the retainer, Mawar. Lance Varay lay nearby, stirring slightly. Melzri regarded her warily, then drew a blade just as the

shockwave reached her, lifting her off the ground before dashing her through a field of ice spikes.

More threads connected across the wide ocean to Alacrya. There, my understanding of what was happening began to break down as the effects of the blast were too widespread for my tired mind to track all at once.

Instead, whether by some thought of my own or some trick of the reverberating Fate, I focused on Taegrin Caelum, Agrona's distant mountain fortress. Many Fate threads connected to points throughout the fortress, and such was the strength of the shockwave as it slammed against the stone walls that the mountain shook and the stone began to crack. A high tower burst apart at the base, sending down an avalanche of shattered stone to crash among the lower levels, the roof of the tower sinking into the imploding base in a cloud of dust.

In the distance, far behind Taegrin Caelum, a geyser of bright orange lava erupted from the caldera of Mount Nishan. Black smoke boiled out to cover the Basilisk Fang Mountains in an impenetrable black cloud, and the ground trembled.

As if in one voice, the entire magical population of the continent screamed out together, and then I was back in Sylvia's cave, lying in the shallow, mostly empty pool beside Tessia.

The aspect of Fate no longer lingered just behind and above me. It was gone, and my vision of the threads of Fate connecting us all was gone with it.

I rolled onto my back and looked up at Agrona. He lay on his stomach, his back rising and falling steadily but his eyes staring emptily ahead, blank and lifeless.

A staccato beat against the wet ground drew my attention back to Tessia; she was seizing, her entire body shaking so violently that her heels clattered wildly against the stone. I dragged her into my lap, cushioning her head from the convulsions of her body.

Golden eyes shone in the dark, and Sylvie stumbled toward us, one arm supporting the other, which hung limply at her side. "What's going on?"

The answer was self-evident.

The high density of mana that was compacted in Tessia's body was beginning to spill out of her, creating a kind of rainbow aura that flickered and danced in the air like the Aurora Constellate. "She can't control it."

Regis, little more than a dark wisp with bright eyes now, flew out of my chest. He hovered in front of my face for a moment, then dipped down and vanished into Tessia. *'She's trying, fighting. Cecilia taught her, or tried to, but…it wasn't enough. She's…dying.'*

I ran my hands over her arms and up her neck where the spellform tattoos had helped to bind Cecilia to the body and maintain control over Tessia's spirit, along with whatever other dark designs Agrona had woven into them for his own purposes. But they were gone. The spellforms had been destroyed by the process of removing Cecilia from her body.

"She has no core, and she isn't the Legacy," I said, holding her tightly to still the worst of the trembling. "It was Cecilia who went through the process of Integration."

'Art…' Regis's thought trailed off for a moment. *'She says…that it's okay. She wants you to know…that you did the right thing.'*

I swallowed and ran a hand over Tessia's hair. It was strange, thinking of it specifically as Tessia's hair again. Her body. *Her*.

I winced as my core clenched. The wounds caused by Agrona's attack were struggling to heal. Despite Regis's sacrifice and the relic armor, my body was starved for aether. My lids were heavy, and every movement felt sluggish and painful. I felt weak, weaker than I had in a very long time.

My fractured focus returned to Tessia with a jolt. Mana was still pouring out of her, creating dancing lights in the gloom.

Without the aspect of Fate tying me directly back to the keystone and everything I had seen inside of it, the many potential futures I had looked at —using a combination of King's Gambit, Fate, and the keystone itself— seemed blurry and distant. It had all been so clear before, right up until the moment I had severed Cecilia and the Legacy from our world…

Only the aetheric realm's future retained clarity. That, I understood. That, I knew what to do with. *Hopefully I* can *do what needs to be done…*

"Arthur," Sylvie said from right beside me, making me wince. I hadn't noticed her kneeling down next to me. "We have to do something."

"I know, I…" I closed my eyes, squeezing them tight and then relaxing again. "I'm sorry, I'm just having some trouble…focusing." With a little shake, I forced myself upright and adjusted Tessia in my lap.

'She's saying…ah, shit, Art. I wish I didn't have to be the go-between here.' Regis winced, a mental expression that sent a twitch through my own slack face. *'She's saying that she understands. It's okay. You've done everything you can. She wants you to know that, after everything…well, she's glad you're here in the end. You and Sylvie. And me, but she added that as a kind of afterthought, and I—okay, okay. She, uh…she loves you, Art. And she wants me to tell you…goodb—'*

"Stop," I said, suddenly fully awake again. "Don't. This isn't goodbye." I looked around the cave as if I might find the solution lying out in the open somewhere.

Agrona still lay comatose. The murky purplish light of the pool had faded, the last of its aether spent. A single tear had traced down Sylvie's cheek, and she leaned against my arm, her breath shallow.

The light of the mana interacting with the atmosphere around Tessia began to fade.

I tried to lift Tessia and stand, but I couldn't. Sylvie did stand, but she wobbled unsteadily on her feet. "I lack the strength to transform right now. I…can't get us out of here, Arthur."

Without even the strength to lift Tessia, I struggled to make a mental inventory of all the tools at my disposal that might help her. I could communicate with her through Regis, I—

"I'm sorry," I said suddenly, realizing that I hadn't really responded to her properly. "This isn't goodbye, Tessia. This is welcome back."

Even as I said the words, I didn’t know if they were true. I only had one option, but I didn’t know enough about it to be certain it would work. Her body wasn’t badly wounded. Could an elixir give her the strength to control a coreless body?

With the little aether I had left, I imbued the spellform on my arm and plucked the two small, bright-blue pearls out of my dimension rune. “Help me hold her.”

I eased out from beneath Tessia, who was no longer spasming but still twitched occasionally. Sylvie and I adjusted her so that she was flat on her back, and Sylvie did her best to stabilize Tessia through the twitching. With the pearls held in one hand, I conjured a small aether blade in the other. Pain shot through my temples and core as I forced the manifestation into place. The blade flickered slightly, then solidified.

Taking great care, I sliced through her top, then the smooth skin above her sternum. The blade parted cartilage and bone as easy as skin, opening into where her core should have been.

Although her eyes were closed, Tessia’s body trembled as I pushed one of the mourning pearls down into the cavity. It settled there, sitting like a tiny, bright-blue core in her chest. *The core of a leviathan infant who never had a chance to live their life…a life now given to Tessia.* I felt my jaw working as I clenched my teeth, the tension palpable, and forced myself to relax.

Regis pulled back from her body at my command; there was no longer any reaching her mind within, anyway. She was fully unconscious, her pulse barely beating.

Both Regis and Sylvie had shared my memory of using the other mourning pearl on Chul, but I could feel their anticipation and distress as the seconds continued to tick past and nothing happened. “It takes time,” I assured them.

I felt Sylvie’s attention shift, and I followed her gaze back to her father. “The Legacy was as intrinsic to his plans as mana veins are to a conjurer. Removing it—even the possibility of it—sent a shockwave through Fate that rippled across the entirety of our world. It was like reaching into his chest and pulling out half the channels running through his body.”

Sylvie glared at her father's comatose form. "I saw parts of it. I…couldn't keep up with everything. What are we going to do with him?"

"I never was able to see past this," I said, sagging. The effort of talking was draining the very last of my strength. "The shockwave—I'm not sure. It acted like a flash of lightning, blinding me to everything after. I saw a lot of other possibilities, but it wasn't like seeing the future, really. More like… coming up with a plan and convincing yourself nothing would happen except what you planned for. But I never found a way to strike Agrona directly—or Kezess for that matter—that worked." I shook my head. "I'm sorry. Without the aspect of Fate here to tie me back to it all, I can't explain."

"He *is* going to wake eventually, though, right?" Regis asked, bobbing up and down and flaring his bright eyes angrily. "I know that using your 'Fate Scissors' technique to beat him won't give us the future we want, but why not just…y'know—cut his head off now while he's unconscious? Use the other pearl to get your strength back if you have to."

I looked between the three of us, then down at the last pearl, still clutched in my hand. With a painful pulse of aether, I sent it back into the dimension rune. "I don't know if the pearl would even do anything to me. I admit, I lack the strength to even summon an aether blade now, but I won't risk wasting the last one."

Sylvie struggled to stand again. She accomplished the task, but looked as if she might fall over at any moment. "I might have the strength…to strangle him while he's unconscious. Maybe Fate appreciates…irony."

Regis let out an appreciative laugh, and I smiled tiredly in spite of myself. Sylvie looked very serious—and as if she seriously might struggle to choke the life from a wounded raptor squirrel. Her expression cracked, and then she too was laughing at herself. I joined in, each shake of my shoulders sending pain quaking through every part of me, but mostly in my temples and the base of my neck.

There was one part of me that didn't hurt, however.

Looking inward, I realized the scar Cecilia had left on my core had healed, and the itching sensation had subsided.

Suddenly, blue-white light, so bright I had to look away, glowed from the cut in Tessia's sternum. At first there was only a trickle, but it quickly became a flood. Mana spilled out of the cut and scrubbed away her scrapes and bruises. Within her, that mana hardened into a dark black pit around the little blue pearl. As more and more mana poured out through the hard black shell, it lightened to red, then orange, yellow, and silver. Finally, the newly formed core turned a bright, snowy white.

Her breathing settled, and the tension in her brows and lips eased. She did not immediately wake, but a comfortable smile played across her sleeping face, as if she were having a pleasant dream.

I smoothed back her hair, wanting nothing more than to hold her in my arms and keep her there. But a part of me was hesitant as well, perhaps even afraid. She'd lived inside the head of someone who wanted nothing more than to kill me. She'd have learned all kinds of things about me—everything, maybe—and been subjected to any number of lies as well. Our story had been anything but simple up to now, and it would be callow and irrational to think we could pick right back up where we'd left off at the beginning of the war.

The sudden appearance of an oppressive mana signature ripped my thoughts away from anything so mundane as romance.

It approached with absurd speed, somewhere between flying and teleportation, and it was flanked by a cadre of lesser—but still inhumanly powerful—signatures.

The weight of it was too much to bear, and I couldn't help but sink to the ground, lying flat on my back. Regis took shelter in my core, little tremors running through his wisp form. Sylvie sank to her knees and stared at the base of the long shaft that connected to the surface.

Dust billowed out as the approaching signature arrived, and I had to turn away and close my eyes against the stinging cloud. When I finally turned back, I was unsurprised to find Kezess standing there. Windsom and Charon, and…a person I had not seen in a very long time arrived a moment later.

Charon hurried past Kezess, ignoring us and going to Agrona, who had still not moved. “Alive,” he said, lifting Agrona’s head by one horn slightly, then letting it fall back to the floor with a *thunk*.

Lady Myre, wife of Kezess and, long ago, my mentor, stood beside her husband with all the grace I remembered. Her gaze seemed to pass through Agrona to something deeper. “He is…wrong inside. Broken.”

With a light touch on Myre’s arm, Kezess took a few steps forward, moving in a casual, unhurried manner that I was too weak to be irritated by. His lavender gaze swept over me and Tessia, then settled on Sylvie. “Bring him. Bring them all. Call for all asuras to return to Epheotus immediately. There, we will close the rift and be finished with this war for good.”

EPILOGUE

CECILIA SEVER

The smell of smoke sent alarm bells ringing through my mind, and I dropped the bundle of woolen yarn I was fiddling with before hurrying toward the kitchen. My hip caught the edge of the side table and I turned too late to catch the lamp, which pitched over sideways and cracked against the uneven floorboards.

Heaving a sigh, I resolved to do what I could for the lamp *after* I rescued the ruins of dinner, and continued into the small, open-air kitchen, where a pot was bubbling violently and issuing black smoke. Careful to wrap my hand first—I'd already learned how it felt to grab the hot iron handle with my bare hands—I lifted the heavy pot off the solar heating element and set it on the table. The iron feet scored little black marks in the surface of the wood.

Biting my lip to keep from sighing again, I grabbed a wooden ladle and stirred the soup, hoping that it hadn't burned too badly but knowing we'd be eating it one way or the other.

I stirred the soup for another minute or two to keep the still-hot iron from burning it further, then unwrapped my hand and picked up the cracked lamp. Regarding it with regret, I headed out the door but stopped in the frame to turn and look back at the small home.

“Home,” I said, the word strange on my lips. Nowhere else had ever fit the word before, but the little cabin, well outside of the city, with its finicky power and endless maintenance issues, just *felt* like a home.

I smiled as I took the three brick steps down to the ground and marched around the outer wall of the cabin along a worn gravel path that was more dirt than rock.

The cabin overlooked a bend in one of the many simulated rivers that encircled the city, its constant flow of fresh water the product of pumps and gates instead of gravity. A thin row of evergreens lined the bank of the river. A disused dock poked out from the edge of our property into the moving water, but we’d never managed to acquire the license for a rowboat to take advantage of it.

Between me and the river, on his hands and knees in the rocky soil we’d cleared grass and weeds from, was Nico. For a moment, I saw him not as he was, but as he had been—both the boy I remembered and the dark face he’d worn in that other life.

The thought made me shake my head dizzily, as if I’d stood up too quickly and seen stars. It was difficult to keep it all straight. Much easier not to try and remember. But sometimes the thoughts came back to me, and I couldn’t help but think about it. I’d had a life here on Earth, as the Legacy. That version of me had lived a short and tortured existence before it was snuffed out by my own actions.

My eyes drifted closed, and I had to take care not to breathe too rapidly. In danger of sinking below the waves of the memories that came after, I bit the side of my cheek hard and forced my eyes open again, then began jogging down the gentle slope toward Nico. The vision of those other Nicos had faded. He was himself again. Although his hair was still dark, his face was soft and kind, his eyes gentle. Just looking at him made my anxiety ease.

He looked up. There was a smudge of dark soil—or maybe fertilizer—across the bridge of his nose and his cheek. I couldn’t help but smile at the sight.

“It’s just like I was afraid of,” he said, smiling at my smile. When he glanced back at the ground, though, the expression fell away to be replaced

by a thoughtful frown. “This soil is horrible. The river here hasn’t been in place long enough to truly irrigate the surrounding earth, and it’s really rocky.” He ran his fingers through the dirt, biting his lip. “Still, we should be able to make it work.”

“Dinner’s ready,” I said stiffly. I knew he wouldn’t say anything about it being burnt, but I wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about it. “Unless…well, we could go into the city? Get something nice? The soup will keep for a few days.”

Nico stood and brushed his hands off on his filthy trousers. “You burned it, didn’t you?”

I burst out with a dismayed groan. “I don’t know what happened. The pot was on and I just kind of got lost…”

“I know,” he said consolingly. Suddenly he was right in front of me, and his strong arms pulled me effortlessly to him.

I pressed my face into the curve of his shoulder and began to tremble.

“I know,” he repeated, his hand running down the back of my long, ashen-brown hair. The detail stuck in my head. *Ash brown, not silver-gray.* “It’s been happening to me, too,” Nico murmured, holding me tight. “I’ll think about something, and the next thing I know an hour has passed and I haven’t moved. I think…” He swallowed heavily, and his hands ran down my arms until his fingers entwined with my own. “I think it’s whatever Grey did.”

Whatever Grey did.

Forcing on a bright smile, I squeezed his hands and pulled him away from the struggling garden. “Come on, let’s go into the city.”

He regarded me suspiciously. “It’s your one weekend off a month, Cecilia. You know if we go into the city that—”

“I *promise* I won’t drag you there, okay?” I batted my eyes at him pleadingly.

Chuckling, he pulled me around until his arm was draped over my shoulders, our fingers still entwined. “I better wash up and put my city suit on then.”

I leaned against him, smiling brightly.

Once we were both ready, it was a twenty-minute hike to the train station, where we could catch a ride into the activity district. We chatted about where to eat and whether we could afford tickets to an old movie at the retro cinema, or maybe even check the licensing office for a car or boat permit, but it was only talk. We both knew the finances simply weren’t there for anything aside from the train ride and an economical dinner for two.

Once we’d boarded the maglev and took our seats, we fell silent. I could tell Nico was slipping away into some troubling memory by the way his smile faltered and his unfocused eyes filled with sadness. I wanted to know what he was thinking about, but I didn’t want to interrupt. No, that wasn’t quite it. The truth was, I didn’t want to share in whatever dark memory had surfaced. I had my own fair share of those moments and memories, and sometimes the smells of blood and burning flesh would swallow everything else. It felt cowardly, but I lacked the strength to shoulder any part of Nico’s burden.

Still, I squeezed his hand and rested my head on his shoulder, there for him when he came back.

“How long have we been here?” he asked suddenly, his cheek leaning against the top of my head.

“What do you mean?”

“Here.” He gestured vaguely around us. “This life. This world.”

“Nico, we’ve been…” Trailing off, I leaned away and cocked one leg up on the seat so I could turn and face him. “We were both born on this world. We’ve known each other since we were children in the orphanage. We—we have a whole life of memories together…”

He nodded distractedly, his focus still somewhere else. “I know. I remember everything, but I…don’t feel like it happened to *me*. Other stuff, I can

barely remember, like my childhood in Alacrya”—I flinched at his mention of the other world—“but that still feels *real*. Here, my memory of everything that happened before we bought the property and finally moved in together, the wedding, everything…it’s all so clear, but feels…”

“Like a life someone else lived,” I finished for him, feathering my fingers through his dark hair.

He stole the briefest glance at my expression, then stared down at his hands fidgeting in his lap. “I just wish I understood what happened. I remember the cave, Agrona, my—” He swallowed heavily and closed his eyes. His breath came out in a tense shudder. “I *died,* Cecil.”

“No,” I said firmly, gripping his hands and pulling them into my lap, forcing him to turn and meet my eye. “And even if you did, it doesn’t matter. I died too, remember? All that matters is that we’re here, together. There is no Legacy, no fight to be kings, no crushing weight of destiny on our shoulders. We can just *live*. Together. Whatever Grey did, however he did it, he cut that fate away and put us here.”

A small, sad smile bloomed on Nico’s serious face. “I don’t think it was Grey. Well, maybe his power, but I don’t think he chose this life for us.” When I regarded him blankly, he rolled his eyes. “It was *you*. This life, this picture we’ve been placed into with all these perfect memories, it is just the way you’ve always wanted it to be. That can’t be a coincidence. It had to be you.”

“I don’t know…”

Some part of me knew that I hadn’t lived through all the memories I had of this life. It was a new reincarnation, but instead of being placed into a vessel—a whole new body that would require us to take over someone else—Grey had somehow placed us into our own lives, our own bodies. I had looked up previous events and confirmed that my duel with Grey had still taken place and that version of me had died there. That hadn’t been unwritten. His time as king, the wars that he had waged, his sudden and unexpected demise, everything was just as it had been.

I didn’t understand it, but the power he had wielded had written us into existence as if we’d always been here. We picked up right where I had

pictured us: in a little cabin by the river, just normal people getting by the best we could. No Legacy, no mana, no ki even. We were just…plain.

Perfect and plain.

There was a ding, and the maglev train began to slow noticeably. I startled, realizing we had been sitting in silence for quite some time. “I’m sorry, I…”

“I know,” Nico said, squeezing my leg in understanding.

We got off in the activity district and walked the length of several city streets, where we sat quietly at one of our favorite restaurants and enjoyed a simple but delicious—and unburnt—meal. As we were finishing, my communicator dinged, informing me that someone was trying to reach me. It had been a splurge to get fitted with a mobile communication device, but with my job, it had felt necessary.

Looking guiltily at Nico, I pressed the button on the wrist-worn control band to answer the call.

“Headmaster, I’m so sorry to bother you,” my assistant, Evie, said immediately. She sounded frazzled. “There was apparently a problem with one of the bills, and there are two officials here from the city office.”

“At dinner time on a Saturday?” I asked incredulously, but I didn’t wait for a response. “As luck would have it, I’m already in the city. I can be there in twenty minutes.”

Nico was watching me closely, his expression carefully blank. He wouldn’t be upset at my failure to uphold my promise, but I knew he would tease me mercilessly about it.

“Oh, thank you, headmaster,” Evie said, letting out a breath of relief. I heard her relay the information to the officials.

“See you soon.” I disconnected the call and gave Nico my best apologetic pout. “I’m sorry, it’s an official thing, I have to—”

He raised one hand to forestall the rest of my unnecessary apology. “You know how I feel about what you do. Those kids—everyone at that

orphanage—are lucky to have you, and to be honest, you need them almost as much. You're the best headmaster they could hope for."

"Except for Headmaster Wilbeck," we said simultaneously. We were still laughing lightly as we asked for the check.

AFTERWORD

Hello! TurtleMe here, author of this little novel that you've just finished reading. I can't believe we've just finished the penultimate book to this series. I hope you've enjoyed the story and you're looking forward to the next and final installment of Arthur's journey!

While waiting, please consider taking the time to leave an honest review of this novel. **Ratings and reviews are tremendously important** and since this is what I live off of, I would greatly appreciate your thoughts on this book so others can make sure that this is the book they want to read! Whether you loved it or hated it, I hope you can spare the time to write your two cents.

Kindest regards, TurtleMe

ALSO BY TURTLEME

The Beginning After the End

[Book 1: Early Years]

[Book 2: New Heights]

[Book 3: Beckoning Fates]

[Book 4: Horizon's Edge]

[Book 5: Convergence]

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