
DRAGON
TOUCHED
MATTHEW KENT

DRAGON TOUCHED

The Atherai Codex

Matthew Kent



Peregrine E Press

OceanofPDF.com

Book One of The Aetherai Codex

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Dedication

To my family,

Thank you for your patience, encouragement, and understanding while I disappear into imaginary worlds.

I promise I'll come back.

Eventually.

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Chapter One

CHAPTER I

Endings

Al came to slowly, the way a man surfaces from anesthesia rather than sleep — aware of discomfort before he was aware of anything else. The air around him sat at an unfamiliar temperature: not cold enough to bite, not warm enough to ease the ache settling into his shoulders. Wrong, in a way he couldn't yet name. He registered the dress uniform before he registered the stone — fabric meant for parade grounds and photographs, now damp at the collar, stretched taut across his chest by the angle his arms were forced into behind him. Something bit into his wrists. Cold. Heavier than rope.

He tried to shift his weight, and the chains answered with a sound like a held breath letting go — a soft, metallic settling, somewhere just behind him in the dark.

His mind, grasping for something solid, did what it always did under pressure. It went back to the last place that had made sense.

The convoy hadn't started yet.

Al stood beside the lead vehicle, watching the sky lighten from black to bruised purple over the wire. The desert was quiet in that hour before dawn, the kind of quiet that made you notice the ringing in your ears from yesterday's firefight. He held a tin cup of coffee — real coffee, not the instant sludge — and let the heat seep into his palms. Three hundred and twenty-seven days in-country. He counted them automatically, the way he counted rounds and breaths and heartbeats.

"Corporal Tanim, you look like you're writing poetry."

Davis leaned against the Humvee's fender, her M4 slung loose but ready, her eyes on the horizon. She was twenty-two, fresh from Pendleton, still young enough to joke before a mission.

"Just checking the weather, Davis." Al sipped the coffee. "Wind's wrong. Dust'll be up by noon."

"Wind's always wrong out here, sir."

Al didn't correct the "sir." He'd stopped bothering three months ago. In the field, rank was what you proved, not what you wore.

Jenkins emerged from the shadows, fumbling with his vest straps. The kid was nineteen, barely old enough to shave, and he'd gotten the new Kevlar adjusted wrong — too loose, riding high where a round could catch the gap.

"Jenkins." Al's voice was quiet, pitched to carry just far enough. "Your plates."

The kid looked down, flushed, fixed the straps. "Thanks, Corporal."

Al nodded. He'd checked them all at 0500 — Cole's hydration, Lopez's radio battery, Davis's tourniquet placement. He knew their names, their hometowns, the girlfriends they wrote to, and the fathers who didn't write back. He knew Jenkins had a kid sister graduating high school next week, knew Lopez hadn't slept in thirty-six hours because he'd been pulling extra watch so the younger Marines could rest.

Leadership wasn't orders. It was knowing who needed the extra hour of sleep and who needed to be busy.

"One, this is Six," crackled the radio at Al's hip. "Convoy rolls in ten. Final checks."

Al keyed the mic. "Roger, Six. All green here." He paused, looking at his team. "You boys and girls look sharp. Eyes on spacing, eyes on the road. We get to the checkpoint, we get home. Simple as that."

"Simple as that," Davis repeated, but she was smiling.

Al's fingers brushed his thigh through the fabric — old habit, checking gear that wasn't there. The ridged scar beneath his fatigues ached dully, the way it always did before missions. The field surgeon who'd treated it six months ago had frowned at the pattern, said it looked almost deliberate, like a brand or a tattoo gone wrong. Al had dismissed it. Scars were scars. But sometimes, in the dark before convoys, he felt it burn with a heat that didn't match the desert.

"Mount up," he said.

The road stretched endlessly into the desert, a jagged scar through the barren expanse. Al gripped the wheel, knuckles white beneath his gloves, feeling the vehicle's weight settle as the column formed behind him.

Leading came with a gravity that pressed down like the heat already building through the steel frame.

He checked his mirrors. Davis in the second vehicle, sharp-eyed. Jenkins third, still adjusting his vest but keeping proper interval. Lopez fourth, radio to his ear. Above Al, Cole settled behind the Mk19. Eight months as his gunner, and he knew the weapon like a piano player knew keys.

"Spacing good," Al muttered into the comms. "Keep it tight, keep it right."

The vibration of the vehicle drummed through his body, the harsh clatter of tires on cracked macadam blending with the engine's roar. The acrid scent of scorched motor oil and antifreeze filled the cab, stinging his nose. He licked his cracked lips, mouth parched from hours in the desert heat.

His hand moved to the comms out of muscle memory, toggling the switch. "Check, check. One to Six, how copy?"

"Solid copy. One. You're clear to the fork. Be advised: this zone is hot—no friendlies, only hostiles. Out."

Al's jaw tightened. He keyed the microphone. "Roger, Six. Eyes on Hajis and speed bumps. Out."

Déjà vu wrapped around him like a vise — this road, this heat, this dread. He'd dreamed it last night, the same dream he'd had for weeks: fire, screaming metal, the weight of someone dying in his hands. He shook it off. Dreams were just the mind processing fear. Fear was just adrenaline waiting to be used.

"Hey, Corporal?" Cole's voice came through the rear hatch, casual. "You think we'll make the checkpoint before chow?"

"Plan on it," Al said. "You got a hot date?"

"Just miss real food, sir. These MREs are killing me."

"Priorities, Cole. Stay alive, then complain about the menu."

The kid laughed. Al smiled despite himself — a tight, brief thing. It was good to hear them laugh. It meant they weren't thinking about the dust ahead, about the way the ridgeline offered perfect cover, about the silence that was too complete.

Al's fingers found the scar again through his fatigues. It was hot now, almost burning. He ignored it. Pain was information. The mission was the mission.

The fork in the road appeared through the heat shimmer.

The blinding flash erupted to the left, engulfing the world in searing white light. The shockwave slammed into the vehicle, followed by the deafening screech of metal tearing against metal. Al's reflexes kicked in, yanking the wheel hard to the right. The armored vehicle protested, its seven-thousand-pound bulk skidding sideways on the uneven road. Behind him, the convoy scattered like startled prey.

The chaos hit all at once. A sickening crunch echoed from above as Cole, the topside gunner, went limp. His body slumped forward, dangling into the rear cab. The vehicle bucked violently, tires fighting for traction, before lurching to an abrupt halt.

Then came the roar. The sharp staccato of automatic gunfire mixed with the deep thuds of detonations. It was a symphony of destruction, drowning out every other sound. Al's head swam, his ears ringing as though he were underwater. A sharp, burning pain lanced through his left leg, snapping him back to the present. Blood seeped through the fabric of his fatigues, warm and sticky against his skin.

He forced himself to move, his mind screaming Get out! They're coming! The vehicle reeked of cordite, gasoline, and the metallic tang of blood, a nauseating cocktail that clawed at his senses. He fumbled with his seatbelt, only to find it twisted and jammed. His hands shook as he reached for his knife, sawing through the stubborn strap until it finally gave way.

"Out! Everyone out!" His voice cracked as he shouted, cutting through the haze of panic. Through the shattered windshield, he caught glimpses of his team scrambling for cover, ducking behind the disabled vehicles. Their faces were pale with terror, their movements frantic as they fired back blindly at the hidden enemy.

But Al couldn't move yet. He twisted in his seat, his hand reaching for Cole. "Cole!" he yelled, his voice cracking. The gunner didn't respond, his head lolling to one side. Al's stomach churned as he registered the crimson streaks running down Cole's neck, pooling beneath him.

Keying the mic with trembling fingers, Al forced himself to speak. "Six, this is One. We have one down." His words came out strangled, barely audible over the escalating gunfire. Before he could say more, the sharp hiss-ping of rounds impacting the vehicle's armor forced him to duck instinctively. Bullets ricocheted off the steel plating, a grim reminder of their precarious situation.

The seatbelt gone, Al pushed himself into the back seat, gritting his teeth as pain flared in his leg. Blood pooled on the floorboard, but he ignored it. There was no time to focus on himself. His eyes locked onto the weapon mount above him. Somehow, the Mk19 grenade launcher had survived the ambush intact, its matte-black barrel gleaming ominously in the desert sun.

Climbing into the gunner's position was agony. Every movement sent fresh waves of pain shooting through his leg, but he gritted his teeth and kept going. The world outside was a nightmare. Smoke billowed from the first and last vehicles in the convoy, boxing them in. Insurgents were entrenched along the dunes, their muzzle flashes illuminating the ridgeline as they rained hell down on his team.

Al grasped the controls of the Mk19, his movements shaky but deliberate. He swiveled the weapon toward the nearest dune, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps. The first grenade thudded from the barrel with a metallic whomp, the recoil jolting through his body. The explosion sent sand and debris skyward, silencing one of the muzzle flashes.

He adjusted his aim and fired again, the weapon roaring as it spat round after round into the enemy positions. A foxhole vanished in a spray of red-brown sand, its occupants obliterated. The dunes offered little protection against the relentless onslaught of high-explosive rounds.

Al's vision blurred with sweat and pain, but he didn't stop. His fingers moved automatically, loading and firing, his mind hyper-focused on survival. The tide was turning—his team was regaining ground, their return fire growing more coordinated.

Through the haze of battle, Al felt a sliver of hope. It wasn't over yet. Not if he had anything to say about it.

The Mk19's rhythm thundered in Al's hands, a steady, mechanical percussion that drowned out everything else. Each trigger pull sent another explosive round screaming toward the insurgents' positions, each detonation a punctuation mark in the chaotic symphony of combat. The dunes ahead were torn apart in plumes of sand and debris, foxholes collapsing, and figures scrambling for new cover or being cut down in mid-retreat.

His crew on the ground rallied behind the renewed barrage. The team moved like shadows darting between the disabled vehicles, their rifles barking back at the hidden attackers. Al caught glimpses of them out of the corner of his eye: Jenkins sliding into cover behind a shattered engine

block, Lopez dragging a wounded soldier toward the safety of a wrecked transport, and Davis tossing a grenade over a dune crest with a feral shout.

Al's leg throbbed with a relentless ache, and the warmth of blood spreading under his fatigues was impossible to ignore. His grip on the Mk19 slipped for a moment, his fingers slick with sweat and pain-induced tremors. He forced himself to focus, to steady his aim, his breathing shallow but deliberate. The world narrowed to the weapon's sight, the next target, and the split-second calculations that came with every pull of the trigger.

"Six, this is One," he growled into the mic, his voice raw. "Enemies entrenched. We need air or artillery—anything. They've got us boxed in."

"Negative, One," came the static-laced reply, cold and final. "All assets tied up. You're on your own. Do what you can to break out. Out."

Al felt a fresh wave of anger surge through him, tightening his chest. On our own. The words echoed like a death knell in his mind. Gritting his teeth, he redoubled his efforts. He couldn't rely on anyone else. Not command, not air support—just himself, his team, and the dwindling ammunition feeding the Mk19.

Behind him, a shout pierced the chaos. "Al, the rear's compromised!" It was Lopez, his voice hoarse and panicked. Al twisted in the turret, the motion sending fresh pain shooting through his leg. His eyes locked onto a group of insurgents flanking their position, closing in fast with RPGs slung over their shoulders.

"Shit!" Al hissed. He swiveled the grenade launcher with urgency, the barrel groaning under the strain. The Mk19 barked again, sending an explosive round into the center of the advancing group. The blast hurled bodies into the air, scattering the survivors like leaves in a windstorm. But more were coming, crawling over the dunes like ants, their numbers seemingly endless.

Al's vision blurred, exhaustion clawing at the edges of his awareness. The heat, the pain, the unrelenting roar of battle—it was all pushing him toward the brink. But he couldn't stop. Not now. Not ever.

"Jenkins!" he roared over the din, his voice cracking. "Get that SAW up and lay down fire! Lopez, cover the wounded! Davis, bring the damn launcher forward—now!"

His crew moved with grim determination, their trust in him a fragile yet unbreakable tether. Jenkins unleashed a storm of suppressive fire with the squad automatic weapon, the rhythmic chatter of the SAW responding to

the insurgents' relentless volleys. Lopez crouched low, dragging another soldier into the cover of a nearby dune, his face a mask of sweat and dust. Davis, lugging a tube-fed rocket launcher, dove into the crater beside Al's vehicle, her expression tight with focus.

"On your left, Davis!" Al shouted, pointing toward an insurgent nest that had just emerged from the shifting sand. She nodded, dropping to one knee and sighting down the launcher's tube. A second later, the projectile screamed toward the target, detonating with a concussive boom that obliterated the position in a spray of sand and fire.

The tide was shifting. The insurgents, once confident in their ambush, were now faltering, their movements less coordinated, their attacks more sporadic. Al's crew, battered but unyielding, pushed forward inch by grueling inch, breaking out of the kill box. Every burst of fire, every explosion, every desperate, pain-fueled order tore another hole in the enemy's lines.

But the cost was heavy. Bodies littered the road and dunes, some insurgents, others the men and women Al had sworn to lead. The sight of their lifeless forms—so still, so final—seared into his mind, a weight he knew he'd carry long after the fight was over.

As the second vehicle in the convoy roared back to life, its engine sputtering but functional, Al felt a flicker of hope. "Lopez!"

"Corporal!"

"Get the convoy moving."

"We're not leaving you!"

"That wasn't a suggestion."

"But—"

"You stop here and everyone dies."

Lopez hesitated.

Al pointed down the road.

"Move the convoy."

"Corporal..."

"That's an order." Al said.

"Jenkins, rear guard! Davis, stick with me—we're clearing this damn road!"

The convoy began to inch forward, limping out of the trap with what little strength it had left. Al kept firing, his fingers numb from the constant recoil,

his leg a blazing furnace of agony. But he didn't stop, not until the last insurgent nest fell silent and the convoy was beyond the reach of their rifles.

Finally, as the last vehicle rolled past, Al slumped back against the turret's mount, his body trembling with exhaustion. The adrenaline that had kept him upright was fading fast, leaving only the pain, the grief, and the bitter taste of survival. His vision swam, the edges darkening, but he forced himself to stay awake and alert.

"Six, this is One," he croaked into the mic, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Go ahead."

"Convoy is through the kill zone."

Al looked around at the burning Humvee.

Cole.

Empty ammunition cans.

The insurgents beginning to regroup.

"Lead vehicle is disabled."

Static.

"One?"

"We'll hold them as long as we can."

Static answered him, followed by a clipped acknowledgment. "Copy, One. Hold your position until further notice. Reinforcements are en route. Out."

Al let the mic drop from his hand, his head falling back against the turret. Reinforcements. Too little, too late. But they were alive—for now. And in this hell, that was all that mattered.

His vision dimmed, and he looked down at his leg. The fabric of his fatigues was shredded, blood soaking through in black rivulets. The wound crossed the old scar. Beneath the blood, its ridged lines glowed faintly, curling around his thigh like a dragon coiling around prey.

He shook his head, convinced the pattern was a hallucination, just pain playing tricks. But the lines glowed faintly in the haze, and the heat radiating from them matched the ache of the old scar above it—the one the doctors couldn't explain, the one that looked like a brand.

The convoy roared in his ears, fire and sand swallowing the horizon, the smell of gunpowder and blood choking the air. Al clung to the Mk19, firing until his hands shook and his leg throbbed like molten iron. His vision blurred—

And then it was gone.

The battlefield melted into polished wood and dress blues. He stood stiffly at attention, breath caught in his throat, staring at a neatly pressed uniform that wasn't his own but belonged to the officer pinning a medal to his chest.

The Silver Star gleamed under the bright lights, but the applause sounded distant, muffled, like thunder heard underwater. Al's leg ached dully, the dragon-spiral scar beneath his trousers burning hotter with every syllable of the citation.

"Corporal Aleric Tanim, for gallantry in action above and beyond the call of duty..."

The words blurred. Al wasn't looking at the President. He was looking past him, into the audience, searching for faces that weren't there. Davis should have been in the third row—she'd been nominated for a Bronze Star the same week. Jenkins should have been there, nervous and proud. Lopez, who'd carried two wounded Marines to safety that day.

Cole should have been standing beside him.

The empty seats gaped like missing teeth. Al felt the weight of the medal cold against his chest, and it felt like guilt. Like blood that hadn't washed off. The applause continued, but he heard only the ringing in his ears from the explosions, the static of the radio, the silence where Cole's laughter should have been.

He stood at attention because that was the job. Because Marines didn't flinch. But inside, he was back in the turret, watching the dunes burn, wondering if he'd done enough, if he'd been fast enough, if he'd deserved to survive when others hadn't.

The heat of the ceremony lights pressed down like the desert sun. The scar on his thigh pulsed with each heartbeat, a reminder that something had marked him long before this medal, long before the ambush. Something that had been waiting.

The President stepped back. The applause peaked and faded.

Al's eyes opened — or had they ever closed? — to the same wrong-warm dark, the same chains, the same patient quiet pressing in from every side.

The medal was gone. The applause was gone. His team — Davis, Jenkins, Lopez, Cole — scattered or dead or home safe in beds he'd never see. Only the chains remained. Only the stone. Only the dark.

And the scar, burning quietly against his thigh, claiming him.

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Chapter Two

CHAPTER 2

Three women stood at the edge of Aelthar's Maw, and none of them spoke.

Lady Catrin Arwen studied the entrance the way she studied battlefields—feet planted, weight balanced, eyes tracking sight lines and shadow. The archway yawned before them, black as a throat, swallowing the afternoon light without reflection. She noted the way the mist pooled at the threshold, thicker than it should be, how it clung to the stone and refused to drift. Wrong. Everything about this place was wrong.

"Well?" Lady Elowen Pryce adjusted her gauntlet, the motion precise, economical. Despite three hours of hard riding through mud and briar, her armor remained immaculate—enchanted plate that shed dirt like water off glass. She did not look at the entrance. She looked at Catrin, and her expression suggested she found the view wanting. "Are we waiting for an invitation?"

"We're waiting for the mist to clear." Catrin did not turn. "Or did you intend to walk into a blind chokepoint?"

"I intended to complete this assignment before midwinter."

Rhyosyn Vaughn laughed, short and sharp. She stood apart from both of them, fingers flexing at her sides, sparks dancing between her knuckles before she closed her fist and extinguished them. Her armor creaked—leather and arcane cloth, barely enough to stop an arrow, designed for movement and spellwork rather than standing still. She'd been pacing for ten minutes, boots crushing the same patch of moss into paste.

"Both of you shut up," Rhyosyn said. "The mist isn't clearing. The mist doesn't clear. Everyone knows that about the Maw." She finally stopped pacing and looked at the entrance, really looked, and something in her face shifted—doubt, there and gone. "It's watching us. Can't you feel it?"

Catrin could. Pressure behind the eyes, like diving too deep. She said nothing.

Behind them, Evan checked her sword's edge with a thumbnail, tested the strap on her shield, and said nothing. Beside her, Idris studied the treeline, then the sky, then the way the mist moved. She noted how it avoided the sun without wind to push it. She noted which of the nobles stood closest to the entrance, and which stood closest to escape.

"Evan," Catrin said, without turning.

"Yes, my lady?"

"Position. Rear guard. Fifteen paces."

Evan moved without complaint, boots finding purchase on the slick stone. She'd served House Arwen for eight years. She knew Catrin's voice—the difference between command and courtesy, between calculation and trust. Catrin used command now, which meant she expected danger.

Idris remained, her eyes still on the mist. "The stories say the Maw breathes," she said quietly. "Inhale at dawn, exhale at dusk. We're between breaths now."

"Poetry," Elowen said. "How helpful."

"Observation," Idris replied. "The pressure will shift when the sun sets. If we're still outside when it exhales..." She didn't finish.

Rhyosyn snorted. "Then we go in now. Simple."

"Nothing about this is simple," Catrin said. She finally turned from the entrance, and her eyes found each of them in turn—Elowen with her perfect armor, Rhyosyn with her sparks and impatience, the retainers with their silence and competence. "We go in together. We stay together. We complete the blood seal together. Whatever waits below, we face it as three houses, not as rivals."

"How noble," Elowen said. But she checked her sword. Drew it an inch, let it slide back. The sound was clean, well-oiled. "Very well. Together. But if you get me killed, Arwen, I'll haunt your family line."

"Likewise," Catrin said.

They entered as the sun touched the horizon.

The mist didn't part for them. It absorbed them, swallowing the sound of their footsteps, their breathing, the clink of armor. Catrin led because she had the best sense of direction in darkness, her hand trailing along the wall, fingers reading the stone. Rough here, smooth there—tool marks from ancient hands, then natural formation, then tool marks again. The dungeon had been expanded, rebuilt, grown like a tumor.

Elowen walked behind her, and despite her disdain, she matched Catrin's pace exactly. Not ahead, not behind. Beside, when the tunnel allowed. Her eyes were everywhere—up, down, the way the ceiling dripped water where no water source should exist. She noticed the carvings before the others, her hand rising to stop the group.

"Wait."

They stopped. Rhyosyn nearly collided with Elowen's back, muttered a curse, then saw what Elowen had seen.

The walls were lined with figures. Warriors, knights, women in robes—thousands of them carved in bas-relief, stretching into the darkness. They weren't decorative. They were positioned as if walking, as if processing deeper into the earth. And every face was turned toward the tunnel behind them.

"They're looking back," Rhyosyn whispered. "At the entrance."

"At us," Idris said. She'd moved up without being asked, her lantern raised. The light didn't reach far—the mist drank it—but in the small circle of illumination, the carvings seemed to shift. "They're warning us."

"Or welcoming us," Catrin said. She didn't sound certain. That uncertainty was the most human thing about her—there and gone, but real. "Keep moving."

The tunnel widened into a chamber, and the pressure changed. Catrin felt it in her sinuses, her ears popping. The air grew colder, but the cold was wrong—damp without being wet, biting without being dry. Rhyosyn rubbed her arms, and for a moment, the sparks returned, lighting her face blue-white before she forced them down.

"Magic here," she said. "Old. Angry."

"Everything about this place is angry," Elowen said. But she was adjusting her armor straps, loosening them slightly—preparing for movement, for combat. "How much further to the seal?"

"Thirty paces," Catrin estimated. "Perhaps forty."

They moved through the chamber, and the mist followed, clinging to their ankles, rising to their knees. It made Rhyosyn's sparks gutter and die. It made Elowen's enchanted plate fog. Only Catrin's plain steel seemed unaffected, and she filed that observation away.

Evan walked behind them, and she was counting. Steps, breaths, heartbeats. She'd served in three campaigns, survived two dungeons, and

she knew the feeling of being watched. It wasn't paranoia. It was the weight of attention, pressing between her shoulder blades like a thumb.

Idris noticed her tension. "You feel it too?"

"Been feeling it since we crossed the threshold," Evan said. She didn't whisper. The mist took sound, but it gave nothing back. "Something's waiting. Something patient."

"Patience is worse than rage," Idris said.

They found the door at the chamber's far end.

It was stone, massive, set without frame or hinge—grown from the living rock rather than built. Runes covered its surface, glowing faintly with their own sickly luminescence. They pulsed, Catrin realized. In rhythm. Like breathing.

"Blood seal," Elowen said. She didn't sound surprised, only tired. "Of course. The old ways."

"Who goes first?" Rhyosyn asked.

No one volunteered. They looked at each other—three women who had spent their lives preparing for this moment, trained since childhood, and none of them wanted to bleed for this door.

"I'll do it," Catrin said finally. "My blade is sharpest. Cleanest cut."

"Your confidence is touching," Elowen said.

"Your courtesy is noted," Catrin replied. She drew her dagger—not her sword, too unwieldy for this—and examined the runes. They were ancient, predating the current calendar, predating the houses themselves. The blood magic was old, crude, effective. She found the activation sequence without Idris's help, tracing the pattern with her eyes.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Do it," Rhyosyn said.

Catrin cut her palm, quick and deep. The blood welled, dripped onto the stone. The runes flared—

—and the door screamed.

Not stone grinding stone. A sound like a throat tearing open, like something being born or unborn. The runes blazed red, then white, and the door swung inward on nothing, on darkness, on air that smelled of copper and old blood.

They stood frozen, the five of them, as the scream faded into silence.

"Together," Catrin said again, but her voice was hoarse.

They entered.

The passage beyond was narrow, forcing single file. Bones lined the walls—human, mostly, arranged with care that suggested reverence or warning. Catrin counted them automatically, noted the breaks in pattern where newer bones had been added to older. Recent deaths. Months, perhaps weeks.

The growl started as vibration in the stone. By the time they heard it, it was already inside their chests, resonating in their ribs. Rhyosyn's hand snapped up, fire blooming around her fist, but she didn't throw it. She held it, trembling, waiting.

Catrin raised her hand. Stop. Listen.

The growl came again, sourceless, directionless. Then movement—shadows detaching from shadows, the passage ahead filling with presence. The beast emerged slowly, as if savoring their fear. It was massive, hunched, fur matted with old blood and older ichor. Its eyes glowed not with reflected light but with internal fire, sickly yellow, intelligent.

It didn't charge.

It studied them, head cocked, and Catrin understood: this was not a guardian. This was a hunter. It had been waiting. It had known they would come.

"Shield wall," she said, and her voice was steady. "Elowen, eyes. Rhyosyn, on my mark."

They moved. Not perfectly—Elowen was half a heartbeat slow, Rhyosyn too eager—but they moved. Evan and Idris flanked them without being asked, swords ready, and Catrin felt something shift. Not trust. Not alliance. But recognition. Professional respect, grudging and sharp.

The beast lunged.

Catrin met it, sword flashing. Steel met claw, sparked, held. The impact drove her back two paces, boots skidding on stone, but she didn't fall. She yielded ground deliberately, buying time, buying space.

"Now!"

Rhyosyn's fire struck the beast's flank. It howled, twisted, and Elowen's arrow took it in the throat—not deep, not killing, but enough to make it choke, to make it pause. That pause was all Catrin needed. She drove forward, blade seeking the gap between ribs, and felt steel bite meat.

The beast thrashed. A claw caught Evan's shield, sent her spinning into the wall. She rolled, came up bloodied but standing, and cut at the creature's hamstring. Idris darted in from the other side, her blade precise, surgical, opening the beast's other flank.

It was Rhyosyn who finished it. She'd waited, hands raised, magic building until the air itself hummed. When she released it, the fire wasn't a ball—it was a spear, white-hot, driving through the beast's skull and out the other side. The creature collapsed, smoking, and the passage went silent except for their breathing.

Catrin lowered her sword. Her arms shook. She looked at the others—Elowen with an empty quiver, Rhyosyn pale and swaying, Evan clutching her side, Idris with blood on her blade that wasn't hers.

"Well," Elowen said. Her voice was steady, but her hands weren't. "That was unpleasant."

Rhyosyn laughed, breathless. "You think?"

Catrin didn't smile. She was looking past the corpse, into the darkness beyond. The passage continued, descending, and the pressure behind her eyes was worse now. The dungeon was deeper than the maps suggested. Older. Hungrier.

"That was the first," she said.

No one argued. They knew.

Elowen checked her armor, found a strap torn, and without thinking, Catrin reached over and adjusted it. Their eyes met. Neither thanked the other. Neither pulled away.

Rhyosyn leaned against the wall, breathing hard, and Idris handed her water without being asked. Evan watched the darkness behind them, and the darkness watched back.

"Together," Catrin said, and this time it wasn't command. It was acknowledgment. It was promise.

They moved deeper into the Maw, and the mist followed, and the carvings watched them go.

Below, something older than the beast stirred in its sleep, and dreamed of fire.

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Chapter Three

CHAPTER 3

The carcass of the beast still steamed, but Catrin's attention was on the walls.

The stone here was different—older, tool marks giving way to something smoothed by time and pressure. The bones that lined the passage weren't scattered randomly anymore. They were arranged. Stacked. Femurs interlaced like basket-weave, skulls placed facing inward, watching the path they'd just walked.

"The Maw redecorates," Rhyosyn muttered. She flexed her fingers, and the sparks that usually danced there guttered, refused to kindle. "Something's interfering with my casting."

"Not something," Idris said quietly. She'd moved ahead without being asked, her lantern held low, studying the floor. "The air pressure. We're deep enough that the usual rules don't apply." She pointed to a shallow pool of water that shouldn't exist—no source, no drip, just still liquid reflecting their lights like a blind eye. "This wasn't here yesterday. I've seen the expedition maps."

Evan checked the edge of her blade, tested the strap on her shield, and said nothing. But her eyes tracked every shadow, and when a drop of moisture fell from the ceiling to strike her pauldron, she noted the sound, filed it, continued scanning.

Elowen adjusted her gauntlet, the motion sharp with irritation. "We're wasting time admiring the architecture. The cult isn't waiting for us to finish sightseeing."

"Neither is the dungeon," Catrin replied. She didn't look at Elowen. She was studying the arrangement of bones, the way they formed a pattern that suggested direction. Toward the center. Toward the depths. "It's guiding us."

"Guiding us where?"

"Where it wants us to go."

They moved in single file, the passage narrowing until shoulders brushed stone. The lantern light behaved strangely here—bending around corners

that shouldn't exist, casting shadows that moved independently of the flames. Evan walked point now, her sword drawn, her steps placing each boot with deliberate care. She'd taken three steps when she stopped, raised her hand.

"Wait."

The others halted. Rhyosyn's hand snapped up, fire finally kindling around her fist, but she held it, waiting.

Evan crouched, touched the floor with two fingers, brought them to her nose. "Blood. Fresh. Hours old, not days."

"Ours?" Elowen asked.

"Different type." Evan wiped her fingers on her trousers. "Coppery smell. Wrong consistency."

Idris had moved up beside her, studying the walls. "Cultists," she said. "They passed this way recently. Multiple individuals. One was wounded—dragged, not walking."

"How do you know?" Catrin asked.

Idris pointed to a smear on the stone, the way it feathered at the edges. "Direction of travel. The wound was on the left side. They were moving fast, toward the center, not away."

Elowen studied Idris with something that might have been reassessment. "Your file said you served border patrol."

"Three years," Idris confirmed. "Tracking smugglers through the Old Tunnels. Similar conditions."

"Then lead," Elowen said. "If you know the path."

Idris glanced at Evan, who nodded once. The guards moved ahead, professional, unhurried, and the nobles followed in their wake.

The passage opened into a chamber, and the pressure changed again—a pop in the ears, a taste of copper on the tongue. The ceiling vanished into darkness above, and the walls curved away like the inside of a throat. Membranous sacs clung to the stone, pulsing faintly with bioluminescence, each one trembling in rhythm with the others.

Rhyosyn reached toward one, stopped her hand an inch away. "These are eggs."

"Or wombs," Catrin said. "Don't touch them."

"Your caution is noted," Elowen said. But she didn't draw her bow. She was watching the sacs, counting them, her lips moving silently. "There are patterns here. Prime numbers. Deliberate placement."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning something intelligent arranged them." Elowen's voice had lost its edge. "This isn't natural formation. This is cultivation."

The argument started quietly, as it always did.

"We should mark a path," Catrin said. "Chalk on the walls. If we need to retreat—"

"We won't retreat," Rhyosyn interrupted. "The cult is ahead. Every moment we delay, they strengthen their position."

"And if we rush in blindly and die, who stops them then?" Catrin's voice remained level, but her hand found her sword hilt. "Your House always favored the grand gesture, Vaughn. Arwen favors survival."

"Survival is cowardice when duty demands action."

"Your duty is to your House," Elowen cut in. She'd moved to the chamber's edge, studying the way the stone had been worked. "Mine is to the realm. Pryce understands that power without purpose is just noise. We don't rush in because we can—we move when movement serves the goal."

"And what goal is that?" Rhyosyn's fire flared brighter, casting wild shadows. "The Crown? The Triumvirate? A throne that hasn't held a king in three generations?"

"The Crown isn't a throne," Evan said. She'd positioned herself between the nobles and the sacs, her shield ready. "It's the agreement. The Three Voices. Without it, the Houses eat each other."

"Pretty words from a guard," Rhyosyn said. But she didn't sound dismissive. She sounded tired. "The Crown is a story we tell so we don't have to admit we're ruled by committee."

"Stories have power," Idris said. She'd found something on the floor—a scrap of cloth, crimson, embroidered with a symbol none of them recognized. "This is cult regalia. Recent. They're close."

The sacs began to tremble in unison.

Not randomly—in rhythm. A pulse that matched, then countered, the beating of their own hearts. The light within them brightened, dimmed, brightened again. And beneath it, threading through the silence, came the sound.

Not words. Not quite. A cadence, low and wet, like throat-singing performed underwater. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, rising when they spoke, fading when they fell silent.

Elowen gripped her bow. "What—"

"Quiet," Catrin commanded.

They listened. The sound continued, patient, rhythmic. Not approaching. Waiting.

"It's responding," Rhyosyn whispered. Her fire had gone out, extinguished by something that wasn't wind. "When we argue, it gets louder. When we're still..."

She didn't finish. She didn't need to.

Evan moved first, positioning herself at the chamber's far entrance, where the passage continued down. "Something's coming. Multiple contacts. The vibration in the stone—"

The sacs split.

Not all at once. Nearest to farthest, like a wave, each membrane tearing with a sound like wet silk ripping. From them spilled the creatures—chitinous, segmented, too many legs jointed wrong. They didn't charge immediately. They emerged, arranged themselves, clicked their mandibles in that same rhythm as the chanting.

"Formation," Catrin said, and her voice was calm. "Elowen, high ground. Rhyosyn, center. Guards, flanks."

They moved. No hesitation. Elowen found her position on a ledge of stone, bowstring drawn before she settled. Rhyosyn stepped into the open space, hands raised, fire building in spirals that cast the chamber in dancing light. Evan and Idris took their places without being told, swords ready, shields angled to protect the mage.

The creatures surged.

Elowen's first arrow took the nearest beast through its primary eye. It thrashed, blinded, and Rhyosyn's fire caught it, burning through the chitin in seconds. But there were more—dozens, emerging from the sacs, from cracks in the walls, from shadows that shouldn't have held them.

Catrin met the first wave blade-to-claw, her sword finding the joint between thorax and abdomen, severing the connection with mechanical precision. She didn't waste movement. She didn't waste strength. Each cut was economy itself.

"Left!" Evan shouted, and her shield intercepted a beast that had broken through, her sword following to open its underside. Idris covered her, driving her blade into the creature's spine as it reared.

Rhyosyn's fire roared, a wall of flame that pushed the creatures back, gave them space to breathe. But she was tiring—the flames smaller now,

the spirals less controlled.

"Hold," Catrin commanded. "Conserve."

"I don't need—"

"You'll need it later," Catrin said. "Trust me."

Rhyosyn's jaw tightened. But she pulled the fire back, let it gutter to embers around her hands, and drew her dagger instead.

The battle became work. Hard, bloody, methodical. Elowen's arrows found their marks with increasing speed—she'd learned the creatures' patterns, anticipated their movements. Evan and Idris moved as one, covering each other, filling gaps, saying nothing because nothing needed saying.

When the last creature fell, twitching, the silence returned.

They stood in the wreckage, breathing hard, and the chant continued—louder now, closer, as if pleased.

"That was..." Elowen paused, lowered her bow. "That was coordinated. They didn't attack randomly. They tested our formation."

"And we held," Rhyosyn said. She was looking at Catrin with something new in her eyes—not warmth, but acknowledgment. "Your positioning. It was correct."

Catrin nodded once, the gesture minimal. "Your fire bought us time. Without it, we'd have been overrun."

They didn't smile. They didn't embrace. But something had shifted, infinitesimal, real.

Evan cleaned her blade, her movements efficient. "The chanting changed. Listen."

They listened. The rhythm was faster now, almost excited. And beneath it, distinct for the first time, came the sound of voices. Human voices. Many of them, raised in that same cadence, echoing from far below.

"The cult," Idris said. "They're performing something. A ritual."

"Or waiting for us," Elowen said. She sounded less certain than before.

Rhyosyn flexed her fingers. Her magic sparked, held, burned steady. "The Maw isn't just a dungeon. It's a throat. We're being swallowed."

"Then we cut our way out," Catrin said. She looked at each of them in turn—Elowen with her perfect armor now scratched and bloody, Rhyosyn with her controlled fire, the guards with their steady eyes. "Together. Whatever waits below, we face it together."

They moved deeper, and the chanting surrounded them, welcoming them, guiding them toward the center where the stone grew warm and the air grew thick with the smell of copper and old magic.

Something had been waiting for them.

It was patient.

It was hungry.

And it was very, very old.

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Chapter Four

CHAPTER 4

The passage wound on, tightening like the throat of some vast beast, the stone damp with veins of moisture that gleamed in the lantern-light. Each step drew the pressure deeper—not sound, not yet, but **weight**. Behind the eyes. Between the teeth. Rhyosyn stopped abruptly, jaw clenched, one hand pressed to her temple.

"It isn't echoing," she murmured. "It's inside. When I open my mouth—" She demonstrated, and the others saw her throat work, swallowing nothing. "It tastes like copper. Like old blood."

"Madness," Elowen whispered. "The air itself is poisoned."

"Not poison," Idris said. She'd moved ahead without being asked, her lantern held low. The flame burned wrong here—**blue at the edges**, bending toward the floor as if the stone pulled it down. "Pressure. The Maw is deep. Deeper than the maps claim."

Catrin said nothing. She was studying the way the moisture ran in channels carved too straight for nature, collecting in pools that reflected nothing. The water was still. Perfectly still. No drip disturbed it.

They rounded the bend, and the passage opened into—

Wrongness.

The chamber was vast, the ceiling lost in shadow that their lanterns couldn't penetrate. But the shadows moved. Not with wind—with **breath**. The braziers that lined the walls burned with flames that cast no heat, only light the color of old bruises. Ash fell from nowhere, gathering on the floor in patterns too regular, too deliberate.

Bones lay in heaps, but they were sorted. Femurs with femurs. Skulls facing inward, arranged in spirals. Not scattered. **Curated.**

Elowen drew her cloak tighter, but the gesture was useless. The cold here wasn't temperature. It was **absence**. "What is this place?"

Rhyosyn stepped closer to the nearest wall, fingers hovering over symbols daubed in something that gleamed wetly. "Blood. But fresh over

old. Layers of it." She didn't touch. "This isn't one ritual. This is... maintenance. Upkeep."

Catrin moved to the center, where black basalt formed an altar—or a tooth, or a hand rising from the stone. The surface was **melted**, not carved, flowed like wax and frozen mid-drip. She'd seen volcanic rock once, in the northern islands. This was older. Colder.

"The cultists didn't build this," she said.

"Then who?" Elowen demanded.

"Or what," Idris suggested.

They stood in disagreement, the five of them, each seeing different threats. Catrin saw tactical vulnerability—open ground, limited exits, elevated positions for ambush. Elowen saw sacrilege, the defilement of natural order. Rhyosyn saw power, ancient and hungry, leaking through the stone like water through a wound.

Evan saw the ash falling, and the way it avoided the altar entirely, as if repelled.

The chanting found them then—not rising from somewhere, but **asserting itself**, as if it had always been there and they had only just become sensitive enough to hear. It vibrated in the sternum, in the molars, in the spaces between thoughts. It had no direction. It came from the walls, from the bones, from the blood, from **inside**.

Rhyosyn staggered. "It's—it's not words. It's **intention**."

"Dragons," Elowen whispered. "They're calling the old beasts. The prophecy—"

"Not dragons," Catrin said, but she didn't sound certain. "Something older. Something that doesn't need wings."

"How do you know?" Elowen challenged.

"I don't." Catrin's hand found her sword hilt. "That's what frightens me."

Idris knelt by the altar, studying scraps of parchment caught in the melted stone. The script moved when she didn't look directly at it, squirming at the edge of vision. "This is command," she said slowly. "Not prayer. Not worship. **Orders.** Given to something that... obeys?"

"Or something that pretends to obey," Rhyosyn suggested. Her magic sparked at her fingertips, guttered, sparked again—unstable, reactive to something in the air.

They argued, then, but softly, voices pressed flat by the weight of the chamber. Not about whose House was greater, but about **meaning**. Elowen

insisted on prophecy, on the old texts describing dragon-resurrection. Rhyosyn countered with older stories—spirits, not beasts, entities that wore flesh like clothing. Catrin said nothing about beliefs, only about what she could see: the ritual had been interrupted, the ash patterns disturbed, something had **left** recently, not arrived.

None of them were right. None of them were wrong. The chamber kept its secrets.

Then Catrin stopped mid-sentence. Her head turned, slowly, toward the altar's far side, where shadow pooled thickest.

"What?" Elowen demanded.

"Nothing." But Catrin didn't relax. "I thought—someone else. Breathing."

They waited. The ash fell. The bruised flames guttered. The pressure in their skulls built.

And the chant **changed**.

Not louder. **Closer**. As if whatever spoke had leaned in, interested now, curious about the intruders. The syllables remained unintelligible—*ashur... veynak... drakhaal*—but the rhythm shifted, became almost **welcoming**.

Rhyosyn took a step back. "It's responding to us. To our presence."

"Or to something else," Idris said. She was looking at the altar, and her eyes narrowed. "There's a space beneath. Hollow. Something was kept there."

They moved together, despite themselves, drawn by the same gravity that pulled the flames down. The altar's base was cracked, the stone broken from within, as if something had **pushed** its way out. Or been pulled.

Catrin felt it first—the hesitation, the certainty that they were not alone in the chamber, that a sixth presence watched from somewhere just beyond the edge of sight. She almost spoke. Almost warned them.

The vision took her instead.

Not her. **Through** her. Through all of them, perhaps, or only through the one it wanted—

...floating, suspended in dark thicker than water, thicker than oil...

...taste of iron, though he hadn't bitten...

...smell of tallow though no candle burned...

...five shapes, seen through ripples, through ice, through tears...

*...a blade flashing, not seen clearly, only the **intention** of violence...*

...fire that didn't warm, that burned without consuming...

...laughter, or screaming, the sounds indistinguishable...

...chains, cold, tightening...

*...his name, spoken not as word but as **claim**...*

...Aleric...

...Tanim...

The vision shattered like glass under pressure.

Al came back to himself gasping, choking on bile and the copper taste that wasn't his own. The stone beneath him was real, cold, immediate. His shirt was gone—when had he lost his shirt?—and his chest heaved against air that didn't want to enter his lungs.

The chains held him. Wrists. Ankles. Black iron etched with runes that **smoldered**, that burned without flame, that ate at his skin like acid made slow. He twisted against them and felt the System—the constant hum at the back of his mind—**falter**, gutter like a candle in wind, recover, falter again.

Not just imprisonment. **Suppression.** The chains were eating his connection to the System, piece by piece.

He tried to speak and produced only sounds. Not words. **Noise.** The part of his mind that handled language had been carved out, replaced by static and the echo of the chant that still pulsed in his bones—*ashur... veynak... drakhaal...*

Footsteps. Voices. Shapes looming.

Al flinched, instinctively trying to make himself a smaller target, but the chains held him fast. Five figures stood in front of him, backlit by flickering fire. He searched for faces, rank, weapons—anything familiar—but found only shadows. Voices reached him as meaningless noise. His world had narrowed to cold stone, biting iron, and the unmistakable feeling of people deciding whether he lived or died.

One of them spoke. Sharp. Demanding. The sounds tumbled through his mind without catching, like water through a sieve.

He tried to answer. "*Don't...*" The word emerged broken, wrong, half-English and half-garble. "*Don't... understand...*"

Another voice. Lower. Assessing. The sounds meant nothing, but the **intention** reached him—threat evaluation, calculation, the same mental processes he'd use facing an unknown hostile.

A third voice. Younger. Curious. Dangerous.

Then—

[The System stirs. First contact is made. The barrier of tongues falls.]

The words weren't sound. They weren't even thought. They simply **were**, sliding into his mind like water finding cracks in stone. Ancient. Formal. Not a notification—an **acknowledgment**.

When the youngest voice spoke again, the meaning unfolded like a flower blooming in fast-forward. "*He speaks like the northern tribes. Or the islanders. But the sounds are wrong.*"

Al blinked, disoriented. The words were clear. Perfectly, impossibly clear. The chant was still there, whispering in the stone, but now it was joined by their voices, distinct as if he'd always known them.

The dark-haired leader stepped closer, sword angled down but ready. Her voice was cool, assessing. "*Who are you, stranger? How did you come to be chained in this place?*"

The women froze, tension sharp enough to draw blood. The ritual might have been broken—but the chains were not gone. Their black links still smoldered, seared into his wrists and ankles, faint runes pulsing like coals that refused to die.

Al sagged against the cold stone, breath ragged. The System's presence still clung faintly to his throat, and through it their words continued to unravel into meaning. But his own voice came back broken, fragments of English mixing with the new tongue.

"*Not... theirs,*" he forced out. "*Please... help.*"

The fair-haired archer's lip curled, disdain thick in her voice. "*Another pawn for the cult? Or bait, left here for us to waste our strength unbinding him?*"

The redhead crouched low, fire still smoldering at her fingertips, eyes gleaming with interest that bordered on hunger. "*No. Look at him—he's not theirs. Whatever the chains were meant to do, they're failing. He's... leaking through.*"

The broad-shouldered guard chuckled, resting her blade casually against her shoulder. "*He begs well enough. And strong, if the chains needed binding runes to hold him. A useful catch.*"

Her companion shot her a look, sharp as a slap. "*Enough. He's not yours. Not yet.*" She straightened, her steady voice addressing the others. "*If the System touched him, then he's marked. That makes him Crown's concern.*"

The nobles bristled, their rivalries momentarily forgotten in the face of this strange, broken man before them.

The chanting beyond the chamber had not stopped. If anything, it had grown louder—sharper now, the syllables carrying hunger.

"*...ashur... veynak... drakhaal...*"

The runes on Al's chains flared in answer, and he felt the hooks sink deeper into him, as if the cult still pulled from afar, as if the ritual had only been **paused**, not ended, and something ancient was remembering how to want.

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Chapter Five

CHAPTER 5

The chains flared again, black fire crawling across Al's chest like living ink. He cried out, the sound strangled, as though the air itself had been torn from his lungs. The runes at his throat tightened, pulsing in rhythm with the chant that still echoed from beyond the chamber— *ashur... veynak... drakhaal*.

Rhyosyn spun, eyes narrowing, flame already coiling around her fists. "They're pulling through him. Using him as a conduit."

Shadows detached from the walls. Robed figures poured into the chamber, their chants no longer distant but **here**, immediate, physical—each syllable a pressure against the temples, a weight behind the eyes.

Al's Marine training surfaced through the panic. He counted them automatically: **eight hostiles, two exits, no cover.** The women had formed a defensive arc around him, but the geometry was wrong. They were exposed. The cultists had the angles.

The fair-haired archer—**Elowen**, his mind supplied, the name clicking into place with the System's help—drew her bow and loosed before her scoff had fully formed. "Finally. Enemies we can actually see."

"Form a line!" Catrin's voice cut through the chaos like a blade. Precise. Controlled. "Hold the circle—don't let them near the prisoner!"

Evan moved instantly, planting herself between Al and the nearest cultist, her sword rising in a guard position that spoke of eight years in the Crown's service. She was laughing, but the sound was tactical—morale maintenance, keeping the enemy uncertain. "If they want him, they'll bleed for it!"

Idris pressed her palm to the collar at Al's throat, her voice a low invocation. Silver light answered her, pushing against the black runes, but the chains fought back, hungry, ancient.

Al forced his head up, blinking sweat from his eyes. **Assessment:** The women were outnumbered but not outmatched. Catrin commanded center, her blade flashing in tight, efficient arcs that conserved energy. Rhyosyn

provided area denial with fire, controlling space rather than killing. Elowen targeted leaders—he'd seen her drop two cultists who wore different colored sashes. The guards held the flanks, buying time.

But time for what?

The chant tightened around his heart like a constrictor. Each breath came harder, thinner. The chains weren't just physical—they were **eating** his connection to the System, swallowing the link before it could fully form.

Break the chains.

The words came from somewhere—not the women, not the cultists. Deeper. Older.

[The System stirs. Foreign bindings detected. A path exists: Sundering. Warning: The way is untested.]

Al gasped, his wrists burning with the choice. The words weren't printed—they were **felt**, like pressure changes before a storm, like the weight of a command from someone who had never learned to ask.

"What..." The word came out broken, English and the new tongue tangled together. "What's Sundering? Who's speaking?"

Catrin faltered mid-swing, her blade catching a cultist's robe rather than flesh. She glanced back at him, eyes sharp with reassessment. "What did you say?"

"He's babbling nonsense," Elowen snarled, her next arrow taking a cultist through the throat. "Focus on the—"

"No." Rhyosyn crouched low, flame wreathing her forearms, her attention split between the enemy and Al. "Listen. The cadence is wrong. He's not delirious—he's **repeating**."

Al squeezed his eyes shut, as if he could shut the voice out. *Is this real? Am I hearing it or...* The sensation wasn't sound. It was **certainty**, knowledge arriving fully formed, like remembering something he'd always known but never been taught.

"It's in my head," he forced out. "Ancient... authority. It says it can break the chains, but I don't—**Sundering**—I don't know what that means!"

"What authority?" Evan demanded, her blade flashing as she parried a cultist's dagger. Her laughter was gone, replaced by professional focus. "What do you see?"

"I'm not seeing, I'm—" He gagged as the collar tightened. "It's not words. It's **law**. Old law. I don't know how I know that!"

Idris's palm pressed harder against his throat. Silver sparks danced across the runes, holding the black fire at bay for another heartbeat. "He's interfacing," she muttered. "But the chains are blocking full initialization. He shouldn't be conscious for this."

"Interfacing with what?" Elowen demanded, her bowstring humming.

"With the System," Rhyosyn said, and her voice carried something Al hadn't heard before—not fear, but **awe**. "He's hearing the old protocols. The ones that govern link-formation."

Al's pulse hammered. He could feel it now—the System's presence at the edge of his awareness, patient, vast, **ancient**. Not a machine. Not a program. Something that had watched generations rise and fall, that had protocols for every contingency, that had—somehow—never expected **him**.

[The path of Sundering awaits. The choice is yours alone. Speak: Yea or Nay.]

He opened his mouth, but no answer came. Only a raw, whispered question: "Why me?"

The System did not reply. It waited, as it had waited for millennia, as it would wait for eternity if necessary.

The silver glow from Idris's hand trembled, fighting the black runes for dominance. Al gasped, eyes rolling back, words spilling from him in fragments of two languages. "It's... waiting... says the way is untested... consequences unknown..."

Every face turned toward him. For an instant even the clash of steel and hiss of fire dimmed.

"He's not initialized," Catrin said, and her voice was flat with the weight of impossible things.

"He's hearing the First Protocols," Rhyosyn breathed. "The ones that existed before the Crown, before the Triumvirate. The chains aren't just blocking him—they're **filtering** him. He shouldn't exist in this state."

"So the cult dragged in something new," Evan said, her blade rising again as another cultist lunged. "No wonder they're desperate to anchor him."

Al's head snapped up weakly. "What do you mean, 'shouldn't exist'? I'm right here—"

"You are," Idris said, her voice calm despite the strain visible in her shoulders. "But the System doesn't recognize your signature. You're not in the ledger. Not in the bloodlines. Not in any prophecy." She paused. "You're **outside**."

The chanting swelled into a hammering rhythm, shaking dust from the ceiling. The runes on Al's chains flared white-hot, searing his skin. He screamed, and the cultists howled in answer as if his agony was nourishment.

"Hold them back!" Catrin shouted, her blade finding its rhythm again—economical, brutal, **professional**.

Elowen's arrows sang, each shot placed with disciplined precision, her curses a counterpoint to the cultists' prayers. Rhyosyn slammed both palms into the stone, flame pouring through channels carved in the floor, and the whole chamber blazed with light that **remembered**—ancient fire, older than the spellwork she knew.

The chains hissed, weakened, their runes sputtering.

"Now!" Catrin barked.

Idris's invocation peaked, silver light piercing the black iron. Evan's blade rose and fell in a killing stroke that cleared the space around them. And Rhyosyn—Rhyosyn reached into the flame and **pulled**, drawing out something that shone like starlight trapped in wire.

The world **shifted**.

Colors sharpened, edges clarified. The chant, once a crushing weight, fell away to whispers Al now understood as meaningless syllables—the detritus of something trying to mimic the System's voice and failing. The women's words were clear, each one crisp, but more than that: he could feel their **intent**, the shape of their thoughts, as if the System translated not just language but **purpose**.

Al collapsed to the stone, breath rasping, sweat pouring down his bare skin. The chains were gone—not broken, they had been unmade**—**reduced to ash that smelled of copper.

The cultists faltered, their formation broken, their chant dying with a whimper as the conduit they'd sought evaporated.

Catrin lowered her sword slightly, her eyes locked on him with the evaluation of a commander assessing a new variable. "Now we see what you really are."

Rhyosyn's lips curled, fire still dancing at her fingertips, but her expression was complicated—curiosity warring with something like recognition. "And whether saving you was worth the Pryce."

Al barely heard her. The System was **here**, fully present, no longer filtered through chains or distance. It filled his mind like water filling a

vessel, and he understood with terrible clarity that he had never been empty before—only **closed**.

[The barrier has fallen. Welcome, Aleric Tanim. The ledger opens. Core access is granted by right of survival.]

Then, sharp and alien, a question that stopped his breath:

[Before the ledger seals, the System offers choice: Do you wish to alter your nature, or accept the form that chance has given? Yea / Nay]

Al's breath caught. "Alter... what?"

The women exchanged glances. Elowen's bow lowered, forgotten. "He doesn't know," she said, and for the first time there was no scorn in her voice—only wonder.

"No one gets that prompt," Rhyosyn whispered. Her fire had gone out. "Not nobles. Not mages. Not the Crown itself. The ledger is sealed at birth. The form is fixed."

Catrin's voice was low, edged with suspicion and something else—**fear**, carefully controlled. "Only the Architects were said to wield such choice. And they have been dust for ten thousand years."

Evan and Idris said nothing. But their eyes lingered on him, hard and calculating, as if he had become suddenly more valuable—and more dangerous—than any of them had understood.

The question pulsed again, patient, eternal:

[Do you wish to alter your nature? Yea / Nay]

Al swallowed hard, staring at the space where the words hung, visible only to him. "I don't even know what that means," he whispered.

And the System, ancient beyond measure, waited for his answer as it had waited for countless others, knowing that this choice—**this** choice—was unlike any that had come before.

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Chapter Six

CHAPTER 6

The prompt pulsed, patient, eternal.

[Before the ledger seals, choice is offered. Do you wish to alter your nature, or accept the form that chance has given? Yea / Nay]

Al licked his lips, throat dry. He could hear every heartbeat in the chamber, every scrape of steel and hiss of cooling blood. The words weren't imagined—they were real, etched across his vision in light that didn't cast shadows.

Catrin crouched before him, eyes level with his, sword still naked in her hand. Her voice was calm, measured, the tone she used when speaking to skittish horses or frightened recruits. "Call your ledger. Think the word Status. The System will answer."

He blinked. "My what?"

"Your nature. Your foundation. What the System has measured in you." She paused, choosing words. "It is not taught, where you come from?"

"Where I come from, we don't have—" He stopped. The chains had been real. The fire had been real. "Status," he said, testing.

The world shifted.

Lines of light unfolded, not printed but remembered, as if he'd always known how to read them and only now been given permission:

[The Ledger of Aleric Tanim Origin: The United States (Outlander) Blessing: American Magic]

And below, the measure of his nature:

Strength: 13 Constitution: 10 Dexterity: 9 Agility: 11 Mind: 12 Wisdom: 8 Charisma: 9 Luck: 16

The women drew breath as one.

"Sixteen," Idris murmured, her contralto barely above a whisper. "Twice the measure of common men."

Rhyosyn leaned closer, firelight catching in her eyes. "I've never seen its like. The ledger does not favor so heavily. Not without cause."

"American Magic," Catrin said, and the words sounded like a curse and a prayer tangled together.

Al stared at the blessing line. "That's not—America doesn't have magic. We have..." He trailed off. What did they have? Technology? Democracy? Fast food? "We don't have blessings."

Elowen's laugh was sharp, dismissive. "Then explain the flames, Outlander. Explain the chains that burned your skin. The System names what it sees, not what you believe."

Idris studied him with the calculation of a quartermaster assessing new equipment. "The System recognizes origin, blood, covenant. What it named you—it matters."

Al looked back at the hovering ledger, the numbers etched in light. Origin: Outlander. The word carried weight he didn't understand. Exile? Stranger? Something else entirely?

The prompt still pulsed, patient, inevitable:

[Do you wish to alter your nature?]

He thought of basic training, of learning to strip and reassemble a rifle blindfolded. You didn't master equipment by accepting its factory settings. You learned how it could fail.

"Show me," he said carefully, "what can be changed."

The ledger unfolded further, revealing what lay beneath the surface:

[The Foundation: 11 measures unspent]

He stared at the number. Eleven. Not enough to transform everything, but enough to matter. Enough to survive.

"Luck," Elowen said suddenly, her voice tight with hunger. "Put everything into Luck. Everything you can spare. You don't understand—Luck is the only attribute that cannot be trained, cannot be bought, cannot be stolen. It is the only true advantage."

"Luck is for gamblers," Catrin countered, her voice level. "Constitution. Mind. Wisdom. These keep you alive when plans fail."

"Plans fail because Luck favors the bold," Elowen snapped.

Rhyosyn said nothing, but her eyes gleamed with curiosity, watching Al as if he were a puzzle that might solve itself.

Al ignored them. He was studying the ledger, the way the numbers sat in relation to each other. His hand trembled as he reached toward Luck—not to raise it, but to test. He touched the number, felt it respond like a string under tension, and drew it down by one measure.

Luck: 15.

The change hit him like stepping onto a stair that wasn't there.

Nothing visible shifted.

The chamber remained the same.

The women still watched him.

Yet something fundamental had gone missing.

It wasn't strength.

It wasn't confidence.

It was possibility.

The quiet certainty that tomorrow contained opportunities he couldn't yet see.

The feeling vanished so completely that he knew, with absolute conviction, this wasn't imagination.

The System hadn't changed a number.

It had altered him.

The ledger flared.

[Measure exchanged.]

[Foundation increased: +16.]

Twenty-seven.

His breath caught.

Around him, the chamber erupted.

Catrin actually took half a step backward.

Rhyosyn stared openly, wonder replacing curiosity.

Even Elowen's practiced composure cracked.

"No..." she whispered.

"That's impossible."

"Nothing is worth sixteen foundation measures," Idris murmured.

"Apparently..." Al said softly, still staring at the glowing number.

"...Luck is."

"Not sixteen to one," Rhyosyn breathed, understanding flooding her voice. "It scales. Each measure of Luck costs more than the last. His sixteen—it's not merely high. It's expensive. The System values it beyond any other attribute."

"Drop it further," Elowen urged, leaning close, her green eyes bright with calculation. "Even one more measure, and you gain fifteen more. Thirty... forty... fifty to spend. You could become a titan overnight."

Al barely heard her. He was staring at Luck: 15, feeling the wrongness of it, the way the world had become subtly less than it had been moments before. Not his imagination. Not psychology. Real.

He raised it back. Luck: 16.

The measures drained away, leaving him with eleven again. And with them returned something he couldn't name—potential, possibility, the sense that doors remained open that he couldn't yet see.

He exhaled, steady now. "No," he said, and his voice was firm. "I won't trade destiny for raw power."

The chamber fell silent. Even Elowen, who had been all but salivating at the thought of instant might, held her tongue. For a heartbeat, they studied him—not as a boy fumbling with numbers, but as someone who had understood something they had not.

"You carry fortune itself," Catrin whispered. "And the world will turn on it."

"As to the other measures..." Al murmured.

His hand found the ledger again, but now he understood what he was doing.

Not gaming.

Preparing. The battlefield may have changed, but the principles hadn't.

He closed his eyes.

Twenty-seven years of life.

Eleven choices.

Funny.

He'd spent months before deployments checking equipment that might save his life.

Now he was checking himself.

Constitution.

His mind went back to the convoy. Cole slumped in the passenger seat. Incoming fire hammering the truck. The moment strength hadn't mattered anymore. The moment staying conscious, staying in the fight, had meant everything.

You can't protect anyone if you're the first one down.

Three measures.

Warmth spread through his body, settling into old injuries, easing aches he'd accepted years ago.

Mind.

Maps spread across vehicle hoods.

Radio traffic.

Grid coordinates.

Estimating range before the enemy ever fired.

A battlefield rewarded clear thinking more than quick reactions.

Three measures.

The fog he'd been carrying since waking in chains lifted another little more.

Wisdom.

The cult.

The chains.

The temptation to accept the first answer simply because it existed.

He'd learned long ago that bad assumptions killed people faster than bullets.

Three measures.

The strange certainty surrounding the ledger steadied.

Agility.

Movement.

Cover.

Getting one more Marine behind a wall before the next burst.

A fraction of a second often separated a casualty report from everyone making it home.

Two measures.

He looked over the finished ledger.

Not stronger.

Better prepared.

That felt right.

He wasn't trying to become the most powerful man in this world.

He was trying to become the man he'd trust beside him when everything went wrong.

He thought of the chains, of the cultists' chant, of how close he had come to accepting the wrong answer simply because it was offered. Wisdom. Three measures. The ledger felt steadier now, less likely to sway with every suggestion.

Agility. Two measures. The leg that had burned in the convoy, that had nearly failed him in the escape, felt lighter. Not healed. But possible.

The ledger locked into place:

Strength: 13 Constitution: 13 Dexterity: 9 Agility: 13 Mind: 15 Wisdom: 11 Charisma: 9 Luck: 16

[The ledger seals. Your nature is chosen. Adaptation begins.]

Warmth pulsed through him—not healing, but optimization, the System adjusting what he was to match what he had chosen. The dull pain in his leg receded. His thoughts clarified. He felt, for the first time since waking in chains, capable.

"Yeah," he said, a ghost of a smile tugging at his mouth. "That's better."

A shadow fell across him. Rhyosyn studied him with eyes that held nothing of the battle, everything of appraisal. She reached out without hesitation, one finger tracing his jawline with deliberate slowness. "Too bad you didn't have more left over for Charisma," she murmured. "You could have been dangerous in a whole different way."

Catrin's laugh was dry, arms folded. "He's a man. Virility matters more than charm. The market decides value, not the seller."

"Maybe," Rhyosyn purred, withdrawing her hand with a final tap against his chin. "But if you had the charm to match the power..." She let the thought trail, her eyes still gleaming with something that wasn't entirely professional interest.

Catrin said nothing, but the faint curl at the corner of her mouth suggested she was weighing him in an entirely different light now that the ledger had sealed.

He was no longer cargo.

No longer a curiosity.

He was an opportunity.

And Catrin had never been in the habit of letting opportunities belong to someone else.

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Chapter Seven

CHAPTER 7

"What do you think?" Lady Arwen asked quietly, her eyes never leaving the young man.

Lady Rhyosyn's lips curved into a slow, lascivious smile. "I think some sisters are going to be *very* upset when they find their brother is missing."

Lady folded her arms, gaze thoughtful and voice edged with worry. "You realize this is going to set loose a fox in a henhouse. There will be inquiries—endless inquiries. Where he came from, whose banner he bears, which family claims him. Once word spreads that a man was found in a binding circle, every House in the capital will want a piece of him."

The others grew still, their earlier amusement cooling into wary silence. Beyond them, Evan and Idris continued rifling through the cultists' corpses for anything useful.

"Rhyosyn," Lady Pryce said, her tone suddenly clipped, "go assist them. See if any grimoires survived—anything that might explain what sort of ritual this was."

The red-haired mage let out a theatrical sigh but turned obediently. "That's *Lady* Rhyosyn," she said over her shoulder, the words dripping with mock civility as she stalked off toward the carnage.

When she was gone, Lady Pryce's gaze slid toward the swords woman. "Well? What do you think, Catrin?"

Catrin Arwen's eyes narrowed, assessing the young man as he buttoned the tattered remnants of his uniform. "I think you're being as sly as a merchant again—trying to buy the goods too cheap and sell them too dear."

Lady Pryce arched a brow but said nothing.

Catrin's tone sharpened. "I know not where he came from, but he *smells* wrong. Look at him—he dresses wrong, speaks wrong. That is a martial uniform, not a noble's garb."

The blonde scoffed softly. "No House would ever allow their men to serve in the army."

“I know that,” Catrin replied flatly. “But those are medals upon his breast, and those markings—tabs of rank, though none I recognize. Whatever he is, he’s not some stray serf or conjurer’s accident.”

She turned fully toward Lady Pryce, her smirk returning, blade-sharp. “So when you start offering your coin for him, triple your Pryce—and then insert it where the babies come from.”

Lady Pryce laughed, the sound rich and sharp as glass. “If only it were so easy,” she said, amusement glinting in her eyes. “Tell me then, of this smell you claim to sense—or should we ask him instead, perhaps about these mysterious sisters of his?”

“Ask if you like,” Catrin replied coolly. “But I doubt he will speak of them. As for the scent…” She paused, head tilting slightly as though tasting the air. “There’s a hint of naphtha, a trace of oil and burned metal. Steel and iron. I do not know the realm he hails from, but if scent speaks truth—it is one bathed in fire.”

Lady Pryce’s brow lifted in intrigue, but before she could respond, the blonde gave a dismissive snort.

“Humph. You’re both fools,” she said, lips curling in a smirk. “If nothing else, he’s an opportunity. A man like that would fetch marks by the score in any brothel this side of the capital. What commoner would not pay good red gold to be serviced by someone with those looks?”

Lady Pryce chuckled again, low and dangerous. “Ever the pragmatist, my dear. But perhaps we should find out whether he’s more than just pretty before you start counting coins.”

Catrin’s hand rested lightly on her sword hilt, eyes never leaving Aleric as he struggled to make sense of their words. “Pretty or not,” she murmured, “the System brought him here for a reason. I only pray we discover what that reason is before someone decides to sell him.”

"You, boy, tell me of your sisters. How did they lose you?" Lady Pryce said imperiously.

The blonde’s remark hung in the air, drawing a few uneasy glances. Aleric had caught enough of the tone—if not the exact words—to know they were talking about him again. Probably not kindly.

He looked over at the woman who’d just spoken, brow furrowed, and grunted as he shook his head. “No habla español,” he said flatly. “Sprechen Sie Deutsch? Tu parles français? Nǐ hǎo?”

The words came out rough, half reflex from years of military briefings and border postings.

The women froze. Lady Pryce blinked, her expression flickering between confusion and curiosity. Lady Catrin's eyes narrowed in suspicion, hand drifting instinctively toward her sword hilt.

"Those aren't any dialects I know," Lady Pryce murmured. "He's not speaking Imperial, or even Northern trade cant."

Catrin's voice was quieter, but edged with unease. "No. Whatever tongue that is… it's foreign even to the System."

Aleric sighed.

"Wait—wasn't he speaking our language just moments ago?" Catrin said. "I could have sworn—"

Lady Pryce looked at her companion. "You're right. Boy, what are you playing at?" she demanded.

Again, he looked at her, then stood. The movement was slow, deliberate. She realized, with a startled blink, that he was the tallest man she had ever seen—he towered over her by at least three inches. She took a half-step back, though he made no move toward her beyond standing there, eyeing her with calm, unreadable focus.

When he spoke, his tone was low but firm. "I'm no dog, so don't talk to me like one." He paused, then added, "As for who I am—Corporal Aleric Tanim, United States Marine Corps. Late of the Second Transportation Support Battalion."

Lady Pryce's eyes widened. The words meant nothing to her—strange, alien syllables that carried the cadence of authority but none of the meaning.

"Marine Corps? Transport? Supply?" she repeated, tasting the unfamiliar sounds as if they might reveal their secrets. "What manner of gibberish is that?"

He pointed to the chevron patch on the sleeve of his dark blue uniform. "My rank is Corporal." Then he tapped the insignia on his chest. "I serve in the United States Marine Corps. The United States is the government I serve."

Lady Pryce's eyes flicked between the strange symbols and the man himself. His words were meaningless to her, but the conviction behind them was not. The set of his jaw, the pugnacious glint in his eyes—he wasn't

boasting, merely stating fact. She found herself taking a half step back before she realized it.

Catrin saw it too: the quiet defiance, the discipline beneath his calm. Stronger-willed than she'd expected. Then she remembered the readings the System had given them—his strength, resilience, whatever strange metrics it used. Her throat tightened, and she swallowed reflexively.

"And your family?" Catrin asked, seizing the moment to redirect his attention away from the blonde.

He grunted, the sound short and thoughtful. "Some would say the Corps is the only family a man needs." He nodded once. "They're the brothers and sisters I never had."

His gaze drifted over the cavern. The bodies strewn across the floor, the blood drying dark on the stone—he took it all in without flinching. Where most men would have recoiled, he simply assessed. Measured.

Catrin watched him, unsettled. Her father had been a hardened commander, but even he might have hesitated before such a sight. This stranger, however, stood unshaken.

"Curiouser and curiouser," she murmured under her breath.

"Of your family, how many are women?" Lady Pryce continued, her tone sharp, probing.

Annoyed, the young man turned to look at her once more. Then, to her surprise, he paused to think. "Some twenty thousand whom I would call sisters in arms."

The women drew in quick, sharp breaths. The redhead's hand stilled mid-motion, and even the guards exchanged startled glances. Al caught the flicker of astonishment on their faces and allowed himself a faint, satisfied smirk.

"And your brothers?" asked the brunette swords woman, voice tight, suspicious. "Surely not as many?"

Again that moment of reflection, the measured tone of a soldier counting by habit. "At least a hundred… sixty thousand, give or take."

The two noblewomen stared, unblinking. "A hundred and sixty—what?" Pryce demanded. "Are you speaking of an army?"

"No," Al said, shaking his head slowly. "We aren't the army. They're a different branch of service." He paused, eyes distant for a heartbeat. "My Corps are soldiers that serve on ships. We take on the hardest jobs—land first, hold ground, invade from the sea."

The brunette's brows drew together. "From ships? You mean… you fight while sailing?"

"Not *while* sailing." He managed a faint smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. "We sail in, land under fire, and fight our way ashore."

Pryce's mouth opened, then closed again. "You… invade whole nations that way?"

"When ordered," Al replied simply. "It's what we're trained for."

The red-haired mage frowned, clearly struggling to follow. "But how could ships carry such numbers? Thousands upon thousands—no fleet in history could hold them."

"Not one fleet," he said. "Dozens. Maybe hundreds. You use whatever you have."

They looked at one another, pale and bewildered. Pryce's voice dropped to a whisper. "You speak of a world built only for war."

Al shrugged. "Built to be ready for it."

"More than that, across all branches," Al replied simply. "That's just the Marines."

They looked at one another, pale and uncertain. "Branches?" the brunette echoed.

"Of service," Al said, as though it were obvious. "Army, Navy, Air Force. Each with hundreds of thousands. Millions, if you count the reserves."

The air in the chamber seemed to still. The flickering fire cast harsh shadows over their faces — a tableau of disbelief.

"That's impossible," Pryce whispered. "There are not that many soldiers in the *realm*. The Triumvirate could not feed such an army, much less arm them."

The redhead tilted her head, eyes narrowing in wary fascination. "Either he lies," she said slowly, "or his world is one of endless war."

"Or madness," Pryce muttered. "A man who believes in armies of millions of men and women soldiers by the tens of thousands — it sounds like delusion."

But the guards said nothing. The taller one's gaze lingered on Al with an expression halfway between respect and fear. The quieter one finally spoke, voice low and thoughtful. "If he's telling the truth… then where he comes from, every man and woman must be a weapon."

Al met her eyes, his expression unreadable. "When you grow up in a world that doesn't give you peace," he said softly, "you learn to make

soldiers of anyone who'll stand."

The sword-woman shook her head, disbelief and something like pity mingling in her eyes. "Either you come from a realm of giants or you're mad, stranger. No crown could command so many, no people could spare that much blood."

Al gave a short, humorless laugh. "We learned to make do."

The words hung heavy between them, the echo of another world none of them could imagine—one of steel hulls, endless oceans, and men and women who made war their trade.

For the first time, the nobles seemed less scornful and more afraid.

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Chapter Eight

CHAPTER 8

The nobles exchanged long, uneasy glances.

"He believes in armies of millions," Pryce murmured at last. "He speaks of invading nations as if it were sport. And he still claims to come from some… 'America.'"

The redhead folded her arms, lips pursed. "Either he's a liar, or he's mad."

The dark-haired swords woman gave a slow, wary nod. "Mad perhaps—but useful madness. If he truly believes he's a soldier of such a force, he'll fight when told." She turned toward the guards. "You two will watch him. Keep him safe." Her gaze sharpened, adding, "And for the gods' sake, don't *bed* him. If his mind's fractured, we don't need that kind of contagion spreading."

The taller guard smirked faintly. "Understood, my lady. We'll keep our hands to ourselves."

"See that you do," Pryce said curtly. "And keep him out of trouble. Men are… delicate things."

Al's brows drew together. "Delicate?" he snorted.

The women ignored him. Orders were already being handed down, the nobles stepping away to confer in low tones. Within moments, the guards—both armored, both armed—had formed up around him like an escort.

"Come along, Sir," the taller one said with a grin that didn't reach her eyes. "Wouldn't want our fragile treasure wandering off."

"I'm fine on my own," Al muttered, but they were already moving, herding him toward the tunnel.

The redhead mage gave him one last considering look as the group started up the passage. "You may be taller than most of us, stranger, but here, strength isn't measured in size. Try not to prove us wrong."

Al bit back the urge to laugh. He could outpace any of them, he was sure—but for now; he let them surround him. The heat of battle had faded, leaving the cold weight of confusion.

Mad, they thought. Dangerous. Fragile.

He flexed his hands, the last ghost of the chains tingling on his wrists. *Maybe they're right about one of those.*

They marched in silence for a long while, boots scraping softly against the damp stone. The torches hissed as they passed, throwing long, twitching shadows over walls carved with runes Al couldn't read but which the others seemed to understand instinctively.

The guards flanked him like handlers with a dangerous beast—one ahead, one behind—watchful, professional, unyielding.

Al didn't speak. His mind was still trying to put the pieces together.

The fight, the chains, the glowing words in his head—*the System.* Every so often, faint lines of text flickered at the edge of his vision: short phrases like *[Data Integration: Pending]* and *[Vital Signs: Stable]*. It was like having a heads-up display wired into his brain. Useful, if it didn't make him feel like a lab rat.

And the women…

They were soldiers, clearly—trained, disciplined, lethal—but none of them treated him like one. To them, he was a curiosity. An anomaly. Something too rare to break but too dangerous to trust.

The nobles had already decided he was mad. The guards had been ordered to protect him—though, judging by their posture, "guard" also meant "contain."

He could feel their eyes on him, weighing his every step.

So that's how it is here, he thought grimly. *Women in command. Men obey. Different world, different rules.*

He didn't resent it exactly. It wasn't the first time he'd had to adapt to somebody else's chain of command. Hell, *Semper Gumby*—always flexible—had been drilled into him since boot camp. The Corps had a saying for everything, even this.

Still, he couldn't shake the memory of their faces when he'd mentioned two hundred thousand Marines. The sheer disbelief—the fear. In their world, an army that size was unthinkable. Maybe in a place like this, power didn't come from training or tactics, but from birth and blessing.

He rubbed his wrists absently. The marks from the broken chains still tingled. The System's voice echoed faintly in his mind.

American Magic.

He frowned. *What does that even mean?*

It sounded absurd—like some inside joke the universe was playing on him. But when he'd said it aloud, they'd all gone still. As if the words themselves were dangerous.

Maybe it wasn't just a label. Maybe it was something new. Something the System had never seen before?

The taller guard glanced over her shoulder, breaking his thoughts. "Still breathing back there?"

He gave her a tired grin. "Yeah. Just thinking. This would be an easy march in the sand pit."

"Don't think too hard," she said lightly. "The Maw eats thoughts if you let it."

The other guard said nothing, eyes sharp, silent as a shadow.

Al exhaled, letting his thoughts settle. The System still hummed in the back of his skull, alien yet oddly familiar—like the weight of a rifle he'd carried for years.

Different world, same mission, he told himself. *Adapt, improvise, overcome.*

He flexed his fingers, the faint blue glow of the System dancing beneath his skin.

Semper Gumby, he thought with a wry smile. *Always flexible.*

And he kept walking.

The tunnel sloped upward, the air growing cooler and cleaner with every step. For the first time in what felt like hours, Al smelled sunlight — that dry, distant scent of wind and open earth.

The guards were the first to react. "We're close," the taller one said, her voice easing from the rigid edge of battle readiness to something almost relaxed.

A faint glow crept into the passage ahead, amber and soft. When they emerged, the transition nearly blinded him. The afternoon light spilled over a shallow valley — gold grass swaying in a slow breeze, the horizon painted with clouds rolling like smoke.

Al stopped dead at the sight of horses. Dozens of them, tethered in neat rows beside a line of pale canvas tents. The beasts stamped and snorted at the scent of the returning warriors, their tack gleaming with polished metalwork that caught the sun.

He hadn't realized how much he'd missed the open sky until it was staring him in the face.

“By the Triad,” the redhead murmured, shielding her eyes. “We’ve been down there half a day at least.”

Pryce gave her an annoyed glance. “Longer. We’ll make camp here and head to the capital at dawn.”

The nobles moved off with purpose, conferring in low tones with waiting attendants. The guards didn’t follow. Instead, they stayed close to Al.

He watched them quietly, trying to make sense of this strange arrangement. The taller one—broad-shouldered, confident—was cleaning her sword with quick, economical motions. Her partner, the quiet one, was securing their gear with practiced efficiency, her eyes always flicking back to him.

He finally broke the silence. “You don’t have to hover, you know. I’m not going anywhere.”

The taller one gave him a crooked grin. “Orders say otherwise. You’re our assignment now. ‘Protect him,’ the lady said. ‘Keep him safe and sane.’ Her words.”

Al huffed out something between a laugh and a groan. “And if I’m not sane?”

“Then we’re to keep you safe anyway,” the quieter one said without looking up. “Preferably from yourself.”

He sat down on a flat rock, the weight of exhaustion finally catching up to him. The horses stamped and whickered nearby, restless but well trained. Someone had already started a small fire; the smell of wood smoke and faint spices drifted through the air.

It should have felt peaceful. It didn’t.

He glanced toward the nobles, still talking by the tents, their silhouettes framed by the dying sun. They kept looking his way—short, assessing glances like hunters measuring a wounded animal they weren’t sure they wanted to finish off or cage.

He looked back down at his hands. The faint blue lines of the System still pulsed beneath his skin, steady as a heartbeat.

This isn’t over, he thought. *Not by a long shot.*

“Semper Gumby,” he muttered under his breath.

The taller guard cocked her head. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” Al said, stretching out his legs. “Just reminding myself to stay flexible.”

The taller guard chuckled, sheathing her sword. “That’s good advice here, Marine. The world bends for no one.”

Idris glanced over from where she was checking the horses, a sly smirk tugging at her lips. “Careful saying things like that, stranger. You’ll have people wondering just how flexible you are.”

Al blinked, caught between a laugh and a groan. “Pretty sure that’s not the kind of flexibility I meant.”

Her smirk widened. “Shame. Would’ve been nice to test it.”

“Idris,” the taller guard warned, though there was amusement in her tone.

“What? The nobles said not to *bed* him,” Idris said, feigning innocence. “They didn’t say we couldn’t *ask questions.*”

Al shook his head, rubbing at the bridge of his nose as the two women chuckled. “You’re a menace.”

“Only when I’m bored,” she said with a grin, tightening a saddle strap.

He smiled faintly, eyes drifting toward the horizon where the light bled into crimson. “Then I guess I’ll just bend with it.”

The wind shifted, carrying the scent of grass and woodsmoke. Somewhere beyond the ridge, a watch horn sounded, long and low. Night was coming fast.

And for the first time since he’d arrived in this world, Al felt almost ready for it.

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The nobles’ tent sat a little apart from the rest of the camp, its fabric catching the last of the sunset in faint ripples of gold and red. Within, a low lantern cast long shadows across the table where maps and wax-sealed scrolls lay scattered.

Lady Catrin Arwen sat nearest the flame, posture straight, fingers drumming lightly against the hilt of her sword. Lady Elowen Pryce reclined across from her, composed but wary, her green eyes flicking between the others like a cat watching for movement. Near the tent flap, Lady Rhyosyn Vaughn stood silent, her hand raised slightly as a faint glow shimmered across her palm.

“You’re listening again,” Catrin said flatly without looking up.

Rhyosyn didn’t deny it. The firelight flickered in her hair, red turned to copper. “They’re talking. I can hear them.”

Pryce smirked. “Eavesdropping on the help? How noble of you.”

“Not on the guards,” Rhyosyn said, lowering her hand a fraction. “On *him.* The Marine. He’s still awake, still speaking.”

“About what?” Catrin asked.

Rhyosyn’s eyes unfocused for a moment, voice distant as she translated what her spell conveyed. “They’re teasing him—about his flexibility, of all things. He’s clever enough to answer without giving offense. There’s humor under it, but he’s… controlled. Disciplined.”

Pryce gave a slow, knowing smile. “A soldier who jokes. That’s rare.”

“A soldier who thinks,” Catrin corrected. “That’s dangerous.”

They fell quiet for a beat. Outside, laughter drifted faintly from the guards’ fire.

Finally Pryce broke the silence. “So. A man who claims to command hundreds of thousands, who fights from the sea, who breaks the Triumvirate’s chains by accident—and bears a blessing none of us have ever heard of. You can’t tell me either of you aren’t thinking what I am.”

"He never claimed to command, but he said they existed, and called them his brothers and sisters in arms." Pryce said.

Catrin’s eyes narrowed. “That he’s a weapon.”

Pryce’s smile sharpened. “Precisely. A weapon—or at least the making of one.”

Rhyosyn folded her arms, the glow fading from her fingers. “You both think too small. The System gave him choice before finalization. That’s impossible under the Triumvirate’s codes. If he can *change* his statistics, he might change more than that. Perhaps even the limits of what the System allows.”

Catrin’s voice was a quiet blade. “You’re suggesting he’s not just a soldier. You’re suggesting he’s a flaw in the Crown itself.”

“A flaw,” Pryce said softly, “or a key.”

The three women exchanged long looks, the flicker of ambition naked now in each pair of eyes.

Outside, the guards’ laughter rose again—warm, human, unaware of the quiet calculus unfolding just a few yards away.

Catrin broke the silence first. “We’ll keep him alive, for now. The Triumvirate will want to see him. But until then, he’s ours.”

Rhyosyn’s lips curved into a small, unreadable smile. “Ours to protect,” she said.

Pryce leaned back, gaze drifting toward the tent flap where the fire's glow wavered beyond. "Ours to study."

Catrin's hand tightened on her sword hilt. "Ours to control."

The wind outside shifted, stirring the canvas like a breath.

And from the guards' fire came the sound of Al's laugh—soft, tired, unguarded.

The three nobles listened. None of them smiled.

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Chapter Nine

CHAPTER 9

The fire crackled softly, throwing warm light across the ring of tired faces. Beyond the camp's edge, the horses shifted and snorted, their silhouettes blurring into the tall grass. Night had settled full and heavy over the valley, bringing with it the smell of smoke, leather, and cooling steel.

Al sat cross-legged near the flames, sleeves rolled up, the faint blue shimmer of the System still ghosting beneath his skin. The guards had removed most of their armor; in the softer light, they looked less like wardens and more like women sharing a long, quiet watch.

The taller one—Evan—poked at the fire with a stick, sparks leaping skyward. "So, Aleric," she said at last, breaking the silence, "where do you come from? You never said."

Al leaned back on his hands, the question pulling a faint smile from him. "Wichita, Kansas. Middle of the States—flat land, long roads, good people. That's where I was born and raised."

Idris tilted her head, brows drawing together. "Witch-what?"

"Wichita," he repeated, slow and patient. "It's a city—kind of like your capitals, I guess, but with more dust and fewer castles."

The two guards exchanged curious glances. Evan smiled faintly. "And who raised you there? Your mothers?"

He laughed, caught off-guard by the phrasing. "Just one. Trust me, one mother was more than enough."

Both women blinked, surprised by the answer. Idris frowned slightly. "Only one? Then who took care of you when she was away? Your other mothers, your aunts, your house-kin?"

Al shook his head, still smiling. "Didn't have any others. Just Mom and me most of the time. My old man shipped out when I was young. She handled everything—work, bills, me getting into trouble." He chuckled softly. "She was tougher than most Marines I've known."

The guards exchanged a look, confusion shading into disbelief.

Evan spoke carefully, as though testing the edges of a foreign idea. "You mean you had no other mothers? None in your household, your circle, your —what do you call it—tribe?"

"None that I've ever met," Al said simply.

The silence that followed was thick enough to feel. Idris blinked, then laughed softly, the sound edged with disbelief. "You poor creature. One woman to manage a home and raise a child? That's near impossible."

"Maybe," Al said with a small shrug. "But she did it anyway."

Evan studied him over the fire, the flicker of respect in her eyes impossible to hide. "Then your mother must have been formidable."

"She was," he said quietly. "Still is."

The flames popped, sending sparks into the dark. For a moment, none of them spoke. Somewhere down the slope, a horse stamped, and the wind carried the faint smell of rain from far off.

In that hush, Al realized that for the first time since arriving in this strange world, he wasn't surrounded by suspicion—only curiosity.

The silence held a while longer, warm and comfortable, the fire's crackle filling the spaces words didn't need to.

Then Idris leaned forward, elbows on her knees, studying him in the firelight. "So what were you doing before all this, Marine? Before the dungeon, before the chains?"

Al hesitated, staring into the flames. "Before all this?" He huffed a quiet laugh. "Standing in front of the President, actually. There was a ceremony —big crowd, cameras, brass everywhere."

Evan tilted her head. "President?"

"He's... the leader of my country," Al explained. "Not a king or anything like that. We don't have those. He's elected—chosen by the people to lead for a while."

Both women looked faintly bewildered, but Idris motioned for him to go on. "And what was the ceremony for?"

Al rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly self-conscious. "A medal. For heroism, they said. I didn't feel like a hero. I just did my job."

The two guards exchanged glances. Evan's tone softened. "What kind of job earns you a medal from your ruler?"

He stared into the flames for a moment before answering. "A bad one. We were overseas—another country, a lot of fighting. Things went wrong.

People got hurt. I made sure more of mine came home than didn't." He let out a breath through his nose. "That's all."

Idris's expression shifted, the teasing gone. "You saved lives."

Al shrugged. "I tried to. Sometimes that's all you can do."

Evan poked at the fire again, her eyes distant. "And after the ceremony? What were your plans then?"

He smiled faintly, a tired kind of smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "After? Go home. Maybe take some time off. My mom kept saying I'd earned a break, that I needed to find something normal again."

"Normal?" Idris echoed.

"Yeah," he said softly. "A house. A job that doesn't involve getting shot at. Maybe even... I don't know. A family."

They were quiet for a long moment. The wind whispered through the grass, cool and steady.

Evan finally nodded. "You sound like a man who's been at war too long."

"Yeah," Al murmured. "That makes two worlds in a row, I guess."

The guards said nothing more, but something in their eyes had changed—not pity, not fear, but understanding. The kind soldiers shared when they recognized another who carried ghosts of his own.

The fire crackled softly, and above them the first stars began to bloom.

The guards had gone quiet, the fire crackling low between them when the sound of approaching footsteps broke the calm. The nobles' silhouettes appeared against the lamplight of the camp—fine cloaks, polished armor, and the unmistakable air of command.

Lady Pryce was the first to speak, her voice smooth as silk and twice as cutting. "So this is where the Crown's treasure hides himself—swapping war stories with his keepers."

Evan rose immediately, bowing her head just enough to show respect. Idris stood slower, expression unreadable.

Al didn't move. He looked up from the fire, his face calm, eyes steady.

Lady Pryce's gaze swept over him like a judge sizing up a criminal. "A hero, they call you. How quaint. Men aren't made to be heroes."

Al laughed—an honest, low laugh that caught even the guards by surprise. "Maybe not here," he said, "but in my world? In mine, we've got plenty of heroes who were men. Some of them legends in the Corps—they're the Marines we try to be like."

Al leaned forward slightly, "Basalone. Dan Daly. Chesty Puller. Carlos Hathcock. Men who stood their ground when the world went to hell and made it back home just to do it again. I can tell you—the stories we tell about them, they're true."

Pryce's lips parted, part disbelief, part intrigue. "You expect us to believe that your world breeds such men by the thousand?"

Al grinned faintly. "No. Just that it breeds enough."

He glanced into the fire, voice softening with pride. "One of our greatest heroes—Audie Murphy—couldn't even get into the Marines. Too small, too slight. So he joined the Army instead. Ended up holding back an entire enemy battalion from the top of a burning tank destroyer. When they found him, he'd run out of ammo and was still calling artillery on his own position."

The words hung in the air, heavy as stone. The guards stared at him. Even the nobles were silent.

Finally, the red-haired mage—Rhyosyn—spoke, her voice quiet, almost to herself. "Maybe that's what it means... this 'American magic.' Not sorcery. Not blessing. Just a refusal to break."

Pryce scoffed, though her tone had lost some of its edge. "Or madness."

"Sometimes," Al said, leaning back and smiling faintly, "there's not much difference."

The fire popped, sending sparks into the night. The nobles said nothing more. But when they turned away, Rhyosyn lingered a moment longer, her eyes on him—not with scorn, but with something closer to curiosity.

Then she followed the others into the dark, the faint scent of rain and smoke mingling in her wake.

Lady Pryce's eyes narrowed, her tone cutting through the quiet. "All these names, all these tales—your Basalones, your Dallies—hero stories for children. But you offer no proof. Words are wind, Marine. Show me something real."

Al's faint smile faded. He stared into the fire for a long moment before standing. The guards moved, instinctively, but he lifted a hand. "Easy. She asked."

He tugged at the torn seam of his right pant leg, pulling the fabric up past the knee. The firelight spilled over a long, jagged scar running down the outside of his thigh—a rough, uneven mark, pitted in places where hot metal had torn through flesh and burned deep.

Pryce leaned forward despite herself. "What caused that?"

"RPG," Al said quietly. "Rocket-propelled grenade. It hit the front quarter panel of the Humvee I was in. The blast threw me clear."

They stared at him blankly.

"A... what?" Rhyosyn asked, brow furrowing.

"A kind of carriage," he said, forcing a grin. "One made of steel. And the RPG? It's a weapon. Fires an explosive charge—detonates on impact. Not magic, just engineering."

The women exchanged uneasy glances.

"I landed hard," Al went on, his voice low but steady. "Couldn't hear anything at first. Everything was dust and smoke. The guys behind me were hit bad. I grabbed the grenade launcher off the truck and took out the ones firing on us." He gave a small shrug. "Didn't think. Just... moved."

Evan's expression softened, though her eyes still held disbelief. "You fought back. Wounded."

"Yeah," Al said. "We were pinned down. Someone had to keep their heads down long enough to drag the wounded out. The launcher did the trick."

Rhyosyn shook her head slowly, her red hair glinting in the firelight. "You stood against armed foes while bleeding from the leg? Without a healer? Without aid?"

Al gave a small, humorless laugh. "Didn't have time to wait for help. You fight, or everyone dies. That's not heroism—it's just the job."

For once, Lady Pryce was silent. Her eyes lingered on the scar, on the calm certainty in his voice. "And you lived."

The young man laughed. "Yeah, if I didn't, what does that make you?" Al said, lowering the fabric back down. "I lived. Others didn't. That's all the proof there is."

Rhyosyn's gaze lingered on him, thoughtful, the firelight dancing in her eyes. "Perhaps that's what your world's magic truly is," she murmured. "Not sorcery. Not divine favor. Just will."

Al chuckled softly, tired but proud. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just American stubbornness."

The fire popped, a thin line of sparks climbing into the night sky.

For the first time since meeting him, none of them spoke. Even Pryce turned away, the usual disdain replaced with a flicker of something she wouldn't name.

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Chapter Ten

CHAPTER 10

The morning broke clear and cold, the light spilling like molten gold across the mountain slopes. Mist clung low in the ravines below, and the trail wound narrow and steep along the ridge, the stones still slick from the night's dew.

Their small company moved in single file: horses laden with supplies, the guards walking beside them, and the nobles in the lead. Rhyosyn rode slightly ahead, a parchment map unrolled against her saddle pommel, her eyes narrowed at the twisting ink lines.

She frowned, muttering to herself. "We'll need more provisions before we reach the capital. If we turn west along the pass, there should be a village—"

Her eyes flicked up, catching movement at her side. Al had drawn closer, craning his neck to glance at the map.

Rhyosyn's tone snapped sharp, as cold as the wind. "Boy, why do you regard my map? It's not as if one such as you could comprehend it."

Al raised an eyebrow, utterly unbothered. "Maps aren't hard," he said with a dry grin. "We even manage to train our first lieutenants to read 'em eventually. Yours can't be that complicated."

Evan, walking her horse a few paces behind, snorted hard enough to earn a glare from Rhyosyn. Idris bit her lip to hide a grin.

Rhyosyn's jaw tightened. "You mock our charts?"

"Not at all," Al said easily, resting a hand on the saddle horn of the packhorse beside him. "Just saying—lines are lines, roads are roads. Give me north, scale, and a compass, and I can find my way anywhere on Earth."

"Earth," Rhyosyn repeated slowly, as if tasting the word. "Is that your world?"

"Last I checked," he said, smirking.

The redhead's eyes narrowed again, but there was a flicker of curiosity beneath the irritation. "And you expect me to believe your soldiers—your men—can read maps fit for a quartermaster?"

“Not all of ’em,” Al said. “But enough. Marines don’t get lost. We just get temporarily misoriented.”

That earned a genuine laugh from Evan, who shook her head. “Sounds like something my sergeant used to say.”

Rhyosyn glared at her, but the edge had dulled. She looked back down at the parchment, then—perhaps despite herself—angled it slightly toward him. “If you’re so certain, Marine, tell me where we are.”

Al leaned in, scanning the curling inked lines and careful notations. “You’re here,” he said, tapping a finger along the ridge. “Head north another mile or two, and you’ll hit your pass. Wind’ll be rough there.”

Her eyes flicked up sharply. “How do you know that?”

He nodded toward the terrain ahead. “See how the trees thin out? And how the grass grows in waves along the ridge line? That’s windward exposure. Means a pass.”

Rhyosyn blinked, caught between disbelief and reluctant admiration.

“Like I said,” Al murmured, straightening up. “Maps ain’t hard.”

The guards exchanged a glance behind him, both smiling faintly. Rhyosyn said nothing more, but her ears were tinged faintly red beneath her hair.

The trail curved upward toward the ridgeline, sunlight glinting off their armor and the far peaks beyond.

And though the air was thin and cold, Al felt lighter than he had since the dungeon.

The climb to the pass took most of the morning. The air grew colder, sharper, carrying the scent of pine and distant rain. Their horses’ hooves struck sparks off the stones, and the wind rose as they reached the crest—a narrow shelf of rock overlooking a sweeping valley.

Al slowed and turned in the saddle, eyes narrowing as the view opened before him.

The valley stretched out broad and green between two long, parallel ridges. Mist pooled in the folds of the land like old breath, curling above a ribbon of river that snaked lazily through the center. In the far distance, sunlight glinted on what looked like distant farms—terraces of cultivated fields fading into the horizon.

It hit him all at once. The long spine of the ridgeline, the gentle river curve, the way the morning light burned away the mist. His chest tightened.

The Shenandoah.

He hadn’t thought of it in years—training weekends down in Virginia, long drives through the valley, radio static giving way to country songs about home and memory. But there was no mistaking it. That shape, that sweep of land—it was too specific, too *familiar.*

His throat felt dry.

“Something wrong?” Idris asked from behind him.

He didn’t answer right away. “Rhyosyn,” he said finally, his voice quieter than he intended. “Can I see that map again?”

The red-haired mage turned, startled by his tone. “Why?”

“Just humor me.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she handed it over all the same. “Fine. It’s not as if one such as you could comprehend it.”

Evan stifled a grin behind her hand; Idris outright snorted.

But Al wasn’t joking anymore. He smoothed the parchment against his thigh, eyes tracing the familiar coastlines, the winding river valleys, the mountain ridges.

His heart sank as the truth clicked into place.

There it was—the long valley between twin ranges, the looping river cutting down from the north. Faint names inked in curling hand marked towns that no one here should know: *Winchester, Front Royal*, *Harper’s Ferry.*

The Shenandoah. Exactly where it should be.

He looked up at the valley again, then back down at the map, the two matching like puzzle pieces across centuries.

“This can’t be right,” he murmured.

Rhyosyn frowned. “What are you babbling about now?”

“This isn’t your map,” Al said, his voice tight with disbelief. “It’s mine. Or—” he hesitated, the words feeling too large, “—it’s from my world. The names, the rivers… everything. This valley down there—” he pointed past her shoulder “—it’s called the Shenandoah. And it shouldn’t exist here.”

The wind pressed cold against them, tugging at cloaks and hair. The valley below gleamed under the pale sun like an echo of another age.

Rhyosyn’s face had gone still, her green eyes reflecting something between wonder and unease. “Perhaps,” she said softly, “your ‘American magic’ has left more of a mark than we thought.”

Al folded the parchment carefully, his hands trembling just a little. “Or maybe,” he said, “this isn’t another world at all.”

The silence that followed stretched as far as the valley below.

Rhyosyn stared at him, eyes narrowing, the wind tugging strands of crimson hair across her face. “You speak nonsense, Marine. You claim to know this land though you have never set foot upon it.”

Al didn’t answer right away. He pointed instead toward the broad valley below. “See that ridge running straight down the middle? Long and narrow, like a spine. That’s Massanutten. It cuts the valley in half all the way south.”

The nobles followed his gesture. The ridge did look unnatural—too straight, too deliberate—as if the world itself had been split open and left to scar over.

Pryce frowned, suspicious but unable to deny what she saw. “You name it so easily. Yet you cannot know our geography.”

“I told you,” Al said quietly, “it’s *my* geography.” He turned slightly, pointing eastward. “And there—beyond that ridge, near the foothills—you’ll find a cavern. Big one. You’ll hear it before you see it. The air hums in there, like stone music. That’s how we knew we’d reached Luray.”

“Luray?” Rhyosyn repeated, frowning at the strange sound of the name.

“Yeah,” Al said, the wind tugging at his jacket. “We called it Luray Caverns. A place of echoes. You hit the stalactites, they sing back. Every note perfect. There’s nothing else like it.”

The nobles exchanged uncertain glances. The word *cavern* carried weight—dungeons, ruins, forbidden places.

Lady Pryce folded her arms. “Impossible. Those caves are sealed, and none but the crown’s surveyors knew their reach.”

Al smiled faintly. “Then it won’t take long to find out, will it?”

Pryce’s lips thinned. “You suggest we go chasing echoes on your word alone?”

“I’m not asking,” Al said simply. “You wanted proof. That’s where it is.”

Rhyosyn studied him for a long moment, her green eyes sharp and assessing. Then she turned in the saddle, calling to the others. “Mount up. We’ll see these caverns for ourselves.”

“What?” Pryce snapped. “You can’t be serious—”

“Serious enough,” Rhyosyn cut in. “If the Outlander lies, we’ll know. If he doesn’t…” Her gaze flicked toward Al, thoughtful now. “Then the Triumvirate will want to know how his world and ours share the same bones.”

The air between them went still. Even the horses seemed uneasy.

Al exhaled, tension easing from his shoulders as he met her stare. “All right then,” he said quietly. “I’ll lead the way.”

He turned his eyes down the valley again. From this height, the world below shimmered under morning light—green fields, winding rivers, the long ridge of Massanutten cutting the heart of the valley clean in two.

“East,” he said, half to himself. “Just east of that ridge.”

The wind carried his words down into the distance, toward the unseen hollow of stone and echo that waited for them.

Rhyosyn’s horse stamped and snorted. Pryce muttered under her breath, clearly displeased, while Catrin silently checked the edges of her blade.

They had seen enough of Al Tanim to know he wasn’t one for elaborate lies. And that made the truth all the more dangerous.

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They reached the valley floor by early afternoon, the sun burning pale behind a wash of cloud. The air had grown heavier, damp with the smell of moss and stone. The ridge of Massanutten loomed to their west like a vast gray wall, and ahead the foothills rolled upward into forested slopes.

“This is the place,” Al said quietly, guiding his horse off the trail toward a line of limestone outcroppings. “If we keep east another half mile, we’ll find an opening in the rock. Feels like walking into the lungs of the world.”

The nobles followed, skeptical but silent. Rhyosyn kept her hand near her staff, eyes flicking between him and the rising stone. “You’ve been here before,” she said.

“In another life,” Al murmured.

The air changed before the ground did. The temperature dropped, the forest sounds fading into the low hum of wind threading through hidden cracks. The trees thinned. The light dimmed. And then they heard it — a faint, hollow resonance that made the horses toss their heads and snort nervously.

Evan whispered, “He wasn’t lying. The air… it sings.”

Rhyosyn’s lips parted, surprise briefly softening her usual sharpness. “I feel it too.”

But before anyone could speak further, Idris froze, hand going to her sword. “Hold,” she hissed.

The others stilled.

A rustle, then another — the brush shifting unnaturally. The low chitter of voices not quite human.

Al's instincts kicked in immediately. "Contact," he muttered. "Left flank."

Shapes burst from the undergrowth — small, wiry figures, mottled green and gray. Goblins. A dozen, maybe more, brandishing crude spears and chipped blades, their eyes glowing with sickly yellow light.

The nobles reacted fast. Rhyosyn raised her staff, words of power rolling from her tongue as flame flared to life at its tip. Pryce drew her rapier with a hiss of steel, the blade flashing silver.

Al didn't have his rifle—but old habits died hard. His hand went to his side out of instinct. There should've been nothing there. But the instant he thought *weapon*, cold steel kissed his palm. He looked down, startled, to see a pistol—familiar weight, matte black, real.

No time to question it.

The first goblin lunged at the lead horse, shrieking. Evan met it head-on, her blade cleaving through its neck with practiced ease. Idris ducked under another's swing and drove her sword up into its gut.

"Thirteen—no, fifteen of them!" Al shouted, snapping the weapon up and firing.

The report thundered through the trees, a violent crack of sound and smoke. The front line of goblins disintegrated in a spray of dirt and blood, the scent of powder hanging heavy in the air.

Rhyosyn's fire burst outward, scattering three more as Pryce's blade flickered through the chaos—silver flashes of precision and fury.

But the goblins didn't break. They screeched. The sound wasn't fear—it was rage.

Al cursed, stepping forward, and swung the pistol like a club. The butt connected solidly with a goblin's jaw, bone cracking under the impact. "Persistent little bastards!" he grunted, driving his boot into another's chest.

"Language!" Pryce snapped, even as she skewered one through the ribs.

Evan laughed, deflecting a blow and twisting her sword free. "He fights well enough—let him swear!"

The skirmish was fast, messy, and close. Steel clashed, fire roared, and the horses screamed as the last of the goblins fell, their shrieks fading to gurgles. Then silence.

Rhyosyn lowered her staff, the flames dimming to embers. “Are they always this bold?”

Idris knelt, wiping her blade clean on a goblin’s ragged tunic. “Not in daylight. Something drove them out.”

Al ejected the spent magazine by reflex—but the weapon wasn’t metal anymore. It shimmered faintly, then reformed in his hand, fully loaded, as if the System itself had refilled it. His jaw tightened.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “And whatever it was—it’s deeper in that cave.”

They turned toward the stone face ahead. A gaping black mouth yawned from the hillside, faint vapor curling from within. The hum they’d heard before was louder now—a steady, thrumming resonance that vibrated in their bones.

Rhyosyn stared into it, then looked back at him. “You said this place sings.”

Al nodded grimly. “Yeah. But I don’t remember it sounding like a warning.”

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Chapter Eleven

CHAPTER II

For a long moment, no one spoke. The forest had gone still again, the only sound the faint hum from the cavern ahead — deep and pulsing, like the earth itself was breathing.

Al looked down at the pistol in his hand. It was solid, familiar — weight and balance exactly as he remembered. The faint heat from the barrel still bled through the metal, but when he blinked, the slide shimmered with faint traces of light, as though reality itself hadn't decided what it was.

Pryce was the first to find her voice. "What in the Crown's name is *that*?" she demanded, lowering her rapier but not her suspicion. "You had no weapon. We saw your hands empty, and then—" she gestured sharply, "—*that* appeared."

Rhyosyn circled him slowly, her green eyes gleaming with wary curiosity. "You conjured it. No incantation, no focus, no catalyst. It simply… appeared."

Idris folded her arms, watching him carefully. "You're saying it wasn't planned?"

Al shook his head, holstering the weapon — or trying to. There was no holster, but the pistol seemed to fade into his side as if sinking into shadow. That earned a hiss from Pryce and a startled curse from Evan.

"I don't know how it happened," Al admitted. "I needed it — and it was just *there*."

Rhyosyn's gaze narrowed. "Needed it?"

He nodded. "Where I come from, when things go wrong, you act. You don't wait. You don't pray. You *move*. I reached for what I knew — and the System must've answered."

"The System," Pryce repeated, her voice sharp. "You speak of it as if it's a servant."

"No," Al said quietly. "More like… it's listening."

That silenced them again. Even the wind seemed to fade.

Evan finally broke the quiet, glancing toward the cavern's shadowed mouth. "Listening or not, it saved our hides. I'll not question a magic that works."

Rhyosyn turned back toward the dark entrance, expression hard to read. "A weapon that answers need rather than command… I've never heard of such a thing."

"American magic," Idris said under her breath, almost reverently.

Pryce's lips thinned. "Or madness."

Al smirked faintly. "Could be both."

Rhyosyn mounted her horse again, eyes fixed on the black mouth of stone. "Then let's see if your madness gets us killed."

Al looked back toward the cavern, the hum deepening until it felt like a heartbeat under his boots. He drew a slow breath. "Ladies first?"

Rhyosyn's answering smile was thin as a blade. "Try to keep up, Marine."

And with that, they moved toward the singing dark.

They stood at the edge of the cavern's mouth, the faint hum thrumming through the air like a pulse. The opening gaped wide enough for three riders abreast, but darkness swallowed the light a few steps in.

Evan dismounted first, her hand brushing her sword hilt. "We'll go straight in," she said. "Best to meet what waits before it comes for us."

Al frowned. "That's not how you'd do it."

Rhyosyn turned, brows lifting. "Oh? And how *would* you do it, Outlander?"

He crouched, scanning the ground—loose gravel, moisture seeping from the rock, a faint airflow he could feel against his cheek. "You don't just walk into a hole in the earth and hope for the best. You post security, check for second entrances, test the air for gas or poison. Then you send a point—quiet, eyes open, not charging in like it's a bar fight."

Pryce made a face. "You speak as if you've done this before."

He looked up at her, eyes hard. "Afghanistan. We used to clear cave systems—insurgents hid in them. You never rush the entry. You plan for crossfire, for collapse, for the unknown. And you sure as hell don't take horses inside."

That earned him a few blank looks.

Rhyosyn folded her arms. "So your 'training' teaches fear?"

Al shook his head. "No. It teaches *respect*—for what can kill you."

For a moment, no one spoke. The hum from the cavern grew louder, deeper, as though something inside was listening.

Evan's tone softened slightly. "You think we should wait."

"I think we should treat it like it's alive," Al said quietly. "If this is the place I think it is, that sound isn't wind—it's pressure. Something's moving air in and out. Like breathing."

That gave even Rhyosyn pause.

Pryce sniffed, forcing disdain back into her voice. "And what would you have us do, Marine?"

He smiled faintly, humorless. "What we always do when it's dark and full of teeth—slow, steady, weapons up, no heroics. The Corps calls it *clearing the unknown.*"

Rhyosyn glanced back toward the cavern, eyes narrowing. "Then lead on, Outlander. Let us see how your Corps clears the dark."

Al moved ahead of them without hesitation, his steps measured, eyes scanning the ground and ceiling. He didn't look back to ask permission — he simply took point, gesturing for Evan and Idris to spread and cover the flanks. His movements were economical, deliberate, like someone who had done this a hundred times before.

The women watched him for a moment, their expressions caught between irritation and curiosity.

Rhyosyn broke the silence first. "He acts as though command is his right."

Pryce's lip curled faintly. "A man taking point before three noble houses? It's indecent."

Catrin, the swordswoman, tilted her head, her gaze following Al as he motioned silently to the guards. "Indecent, perhaps. But effective."

Rhyosyn shot her a look. "You'd let a man give you orders?"

"I'd let anyone give me orders if it meant not dying in a hole," Catrin replied coolly. "He moves like someone who's lived through worse than this."

Evan and Idris exchanged glances, faint smiles flickering across their faces but saying nothing.

Pryce huffed. "Still, it isn't natural. Men don't lead. They assist. They advise. They certainly don't *command*."

"Maybe in your house," Catrin said dryly. "But I've yet to see any of your 'natural' leaders stop a charge barehanded."

Rhyosyn turned her gaze toward the cavern where Al had paused, half-shadowed by the flickering light from her staff. “He’s wrong,” she said finally, almost as if convincing herself. “He doesn’t understand our ways. He acts by instinct, not training.”

“Perhaps,” Catrin murmured, “but instinct has a way of keeping soldiers alive.”

Pryce frowned, torn between disdain and uncertainty. “It still feels wrong. A man shouldn’t *look* like that when giving orders. It makes people listen.”

“Then perhaps that’s his danger,” Rhyosyn said quietly. “Not his strength.”

The hum from the cavern deepened, vibrating through the earth beneath their feet. Al turned back to look at them, silhouetted against the faint, pale glow spilling from the mouth of the cave.

“You coming,” he asked, voice low but steady, “or waiting for permission?”

That earned him three sharp looks — but one by one, they followed.

The darkness swallowed their words as the sound of their footsteps joined the cave’s eerie song.

The air inside the cavern was colder, heavy with mineral damp and the faint metallic tang of old water. Every sound carried — the scuff of boots, the creak of leather, the faint jingle of weapons.

Rhyosyn’s staff cast a dim, flickering glow that painted the walls in shades of amber and shadow. The tunnel opened into a wide passage ahead, and the humming was louder now — resonant, layered, almost harmonic.

Al raised a hand. “Hold up.”

The women stopped, startled by his sudden command, but something in his tone made even Rhyosyn obey.

He looked around — the uneven ground, the low ceiling, the sense that the darkness went on forever. This was no place for firelight. It left too many shadows.

He reached for his shoulder. *I need light,* he thought. *Something steady. Not a torch — a flashlight.*

And just like before, the air shimmered.

A moment later, a solid, olive-drab cylinder settled into his palm — cold metal, textured grip, the faint weight of a standard-issue Maglite. He thumbed the button.

A beam of white light cut through the dark. Pure, focused, blinding.

The nobles recoiled as the cave illuminated — glittering stone formations, dripping stalactites, a mirrored pool that reflected their startled faces.

“What sorcery—” Pryce began.

Al ignored her, sweeping the beam across the chamber. “This is more like it,” he muttered, voice half awe, half soldier’s focus.

The light caught movement — not life, just the shimmer of moisture — and he took a slow breath. “Caves like this? They go for miles. You could fit a battalion down here if you wanted to.”

Catrin frowned. “You conjure tools as easily as blades. How is that possible?”

Al glanced down at the flashlight, its beam unwavering. “Maybe because I expect them to be there.”

“You *expect* them?” Rhyosyn repeated.

He shrugged. “Back home, you don’t think about your gear not existing. You just reach, and it’s there. Guess the System agrees with me.”

Rhyosyn stared at him as though trying to see the shape of something invisible. “You act as if this power obeys you.”

“Maybe it does,” Al said. “Or maybe it’s just listening.”

He moved forward again, light sweeping the path ahead — and then stopped. A sound. A shift in air pressure. The hairs on the back of his neck rose.

He reached down, instinct guiding him again. “We’re not alone.”

Before he even thought the next words, a shape formed in his hand — matte black, polymer frame, a pistol that hummed faintly as though the System itself disapproved of its intrusion into this world.

He brought it up smoothly, sighting down the beam of the flashlight.

The nobles stiffened as the weapon materialized, the air around it crackling with strange energy.

“By the Triumvirate,” Pryce whispered, “he called another.”

Al’s expression hardened. “No,” he said softly, the familiar weight grounding him. “I just called *mine*.”

The hum from deeper in the cavern shifted — a note higher, sharper, almost questioning.

Rhyosyn swallowed, eyes fixed on the pistol. “Marine,” she said quietly, “what manner of weapon is that?”

He didn’t answer right away. His gaze stayed locked on the darkness ahead, muscles taut. “One that gets real loud,” he said finally, “when things go bad.”

And as if answering him, the hum in the depths of the cavern changed again — no longer a song, but a pulse. A heartbeat.

The tunnel narrowed ahead, the ceiling dipping low enough that Al had to crouch as he advanced. The hum that had filled the air moments before was gone now—replaced by something smaller, sharper. A rasping scrape of claws on stone. The whisper of breath.

He held up a hand, signaling for silence. The beam of his flashlight swept the darkness in a slow arc, tracing slick stone and ragged stalactites that dripped with mineral tears. The air smelled faintly of rot and ammonia.

Something moved.

The light caught a flash of scaly hide and pale, leathery ears pressed flat against a skull too narrow for comfort. The creature hissed and scrambled back into the dark. Another answered from above, a rasping chirr that set Al’s teeth on edge.

“Kobolds,” Rhyosyn breathed, her staff lifting instinctively. “They dwell near old dragon sites.”

Al muttered, “Of course they do.”

There was a rush of motion—shadows breaking from the walls. The flashlight beam struck a dozen of them at once: man-sized, hunched creatures covered in mottled scales, their faces a warped cross between rat and lizard, eyes milky-white from generations underground. They blinked and shrieked, recoiling from the sudden glare.

“Light blinds them!” Catrin shouted.

Al grinned tightly. “Then let’s make it *hurt*.”

He twisted the flashlight toward them and fired. The pistol barked once, echoing through the chamber like thunder. The lead kobold collapsed in a spatter of black ichor, the others screeching and flailing, claws raking at their faces as they tried to flee the light.

Rhyosyn threw her staff forward, a wave of fire chasing the retreating creatures, the sudden heat filling the cavern with the stench of burning scales. Pryce darted past her, her rapier finding throats in quick, economical thrusts.

Evan and Idris moved like clockwork, cutting down anything that slipped past.

“Don’t let them circle!” Al shouted. “They’ll try to draw you into the dark!”

“How do you know that?” Pryce demanded, parrying a lunging kobold.

“I’ve fought their cousins!” Al snapped. “Different planet, same idea!”

The creatures were fast and desperate, hissing through broken teeth, their claws sharp enough to scrape steel. But the light—*the light*—was death to them. Every time the flashlight beam cut across them, they shrieked and stumbled, blinded, exposed.

Rhyosyn’s magic flared again, searing the walls with arcs of molten fire. Catrin moved to cover her, blade flashing as one of the creatures leapt from a ledge. It never landed—Al shot it midair, the sound deafening in the close space.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the noise stopped. The survivors fled into the fissures, their chittering fading into the dark.

The smell of smoke and blood filled the air.

Al lowered the pistol slowly, scanning for movement. “Anyone hit?”

“Scratches,” Idris said, wiping her sword clean. “Nothing deep.”

Rhyosyn’s staff dimmed to a steady glow again. She stared at the carcass nearest her—its twisted body still twitching, the skin somewhere between hide and sinew. “You’ve fought things like these before?” she asked.

Al nodded once. “Different shapes. Same eyes.”

Pryce frowned. “What are they?”

“Kobolds,” Rhyosyn said softly, crouching beside one. “They worship dragons, protect their bones and eggs. They should not be here.”

“They weren’t here for us,” Al said, stepping closer to the tunnel that led deeper. “They were guarding something.”

Catrin’s eyes followed his beam of light down the narrow passage, where the stone floor sloped steeply into shadow. The hum had returned—fainter now, but pulsing like a heartbeat.

“Something,” she murmured, “or *someone*.”

Al’s hand tightened on the pistol. “Either way,” he said, “we’re going to find out.”

The beam of his flashlight cut forward, slicing through the dark as they descended deeper into the earth.

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Chapter Twelve

CHAPTER 12

Al released his gun back to wherever it went, the air around his hand shimmering faintly as the weapon dissolved into nothing. Then he reached into his vest pocket and drew out another object — small, metallic, and worn smooth by time.

He flipped it open with a click. Inside, a needle spun wildly before twitching toward no consistent direction.

Rhyosyn frowned. “What is that?”

“It’s a compass,” Al said, watching the dial. “Or it’s supposed to be. But yeah, we’ve got kobolds in our myths too. Miners, usually. I just wanted to check.”

“Check what?”

He angled the face toward her. The needle jittered, reversed, then spun in lazy circles as though drunk. “See how it’s spinning?”

“Yes,” Rhyosyn said slowly, the flicker of her staff casting her face in gold and shadow. “It should not move so?”

“No, it shouldn't. At a guess,” Al said, snapping the lid closed, “there’s a rich iron vein nearby — or something magnetic enough to throw this off its bearings.”

Evan glanced toward the walls. “Then that’s what they were after.”

“Maybe.” Al adjusted the flashlight beam. The walls ahead shimmered with a faint red sheen where water had streaked down over time. Veins of metallic ore pulsed under the light, glittering faintly in shades of rust and black.

Rhyosyn stepped closer, touching the rock with her gloved fingertips. A faint spark leapt between skin and stone. She flinched, jerking her hand back. “That’s no ordinary iron,” she said. “It holds resonance. Like a forge stone.”

“A forge stone?” Al asked.

Her eyes gleamed, fascinated despite herself. “Metal that remembers fire. Old dragonforged ore — relics of their kind’s shaping. To mine it without

rites is suicide. Even the dwarrows won't touch it raw."

"Guess the kobolds didn't get the memo," Al muttered, sweeping the light across the floor. The beam passed over a rusted pickaxe, a half-collapsed cart, and a scattering of small bones.

Idris knelt, turning one over. "Not all of them were miners."

"No," Al said, crouching beside her. "Somebody *made* them mine."

The others exchanged uneasy looks. The humming in the walls deepened, a low vibration that seemed to crawl into their chests. Even the compass in Al's hand began to tremble again, its needle hammering wildly against the casing.

Rhyosyn straightened slowly, her staff pulsing in answer to the sound. "Whatever they were digging for," she said, "it's still alive in the rock."

Al flicked the compass shut, his expression grim. "Then we'd better find it before it wakes up."

The hum swelled again — low, rhythmic, almost like something *breathing* just beneath the surface of the stone.

The tunnel wound downward in a slow, uneven spiral. The deeper they went, the more the walls bled red light — faint at first, then pulsing in time with the hum that had followed them since they entered the cave. The air grew warmer, metallic, almost electric.

The kobolds' work had left its mark here. Crude wooden scaffolds clung to the rock face, rope ladders dangling over deep crevices. Carts filled with rough ore sat overturned, their contents glittering faintly like veins of molten blood. The deeper chambers opened up into a half-finished mine, the roof a lattice of jagged stalactites that caught the light of Rhyosyn's staff and scattered it in a thousand small reflections.

Then they saw it.

The kobold camp.

Tattered bedrolls of woven hide, cracked clay pots, crude symbols painted in ash and blood on the walls. Bones — not just kobold — lay in heaps near smoldering pits. And in the center of it all, half-buried in the back wall of the chamber, something glowed.

At first Al thought it was firelight caught in crystal. Then the light pulsed — steady, rhythmic, seven beats followed by silence.

"What in God's name…" he murmured.

Rhyosyn's breath caught. She stepped forward slowly, eyes wide, her staff trembling as its light dimmed in response. "No… no, it cannot be…"

“What is it?” Pryce demanded.

Rhyosyn lifted her hand, tracing symbols in the air as if searching for meaning that refused to come. “The Stone of Seven Suns,” she whispered, reverence and dread tangled in her tone. “A relic from before the Sundering. Said to hold the light of creation itself.”

Evan frowned. “That looks like a lump of rock to me.”

Rhyosyn ignored her. “It’s said the Dragons used it to shape the first forges, to breathe life into metal. It draws from the heavens themselves—”

Al crouched, shining his flashlight on it. “You sure about that? Because it doesn’t look like it’s drawing from anything. Looks more like it’s trying to *get out.*”

The stone was huge — twice the size of his fists together — wedged deep into the rock, its surface smooth and glasslike, light spilling from seven radiating cracks that pulsed like veins. Each pulse was stronger than the last, the hum now a deep vibration in the soles of their boots.

Rhyosyn extended a hand toward it. The air rippled around her fingers. “It’s calling to the suns above—”

“Or something else,” Al said under his breath. He glanced at the way the light pulsed — seven beats. Not random. A rhythm. *Heartbeat.*

He took a step closer, ignoring Rhyosyn’s sharp intake of breath.

“Don’t touch it!” she snapped. “You don’t understand what that is—”

“Yeah,” Al said quietly, “I think I do.”

He reached out and wrapped his hands around it. The moment his skin met the surface, the glow flared blinding white. The hum became a roar. The air cracked like thunder.

“Al!” someone shouted — he didn’t know who.

The stone shuddered once, then broke free with a sound like a cannon firing.

Al staggered backward, clutching it against his chest. It was hot — no, *alive* — its glow spilling between his fingers like sunlight through water. The light wasn’t gold, though. It was blue-white, pure and strange, shot through with streaks of red.

The walls vibrated. Pebbles rained down from above.

Rhyosyn threw up a shield of magic, her voice rising over the din. “Fool! You’ve disturbed it! The suns will—”

“Not suns,” Al gasped, staring at the light pulsing in his hands. The rhythm matched his heartbeat. The warmth coursed up his arms, into his

veins. “Not suns… sons.”

“What?” Pryce barked.

But the word was already changing in the air, twisting as though the cavern itself understood. The resonance shifted — seven distinct tones, layered one over another.

Rhyosyn’s eyes went wide. “It’s not celestial—it’s *ancestral.*”

Al’s flashlight flickered, the beam stuttering as the System chimed faintly in his head.

[System Notification: Unknown artifact detected.] Designation: *Stone of the Seven Sons* **Status:** Bonding. *Host synchronization: 3%... 9%... 17%...*

The light flared again, washing the chamber in brilliance.

“Al!” Evan shouted, shielding her eyes. “Drop it!”

But he couldn’t. The stone’s glow flowed through his skin, into the veins of his arms, burning cold and electric. The hum became a voice he almost recognized — a language older than speech, older than thought.

Then, just as suddenly, it stopped.

The stone dimmed. The hum vanished. The only sound left was Al’s ragged breathing and the faint crackle of settling dust.

He looked down. The glow had faded, but the stone still pulsed faintly against his palm — seven heartbeats, one after another.

Rhyosyn lowered her staff, her face pale and unreadable. “You shouldn’t be alive.”

Al gave a shaky grin. “Guess I’m lucky.”

Her gaze dropped to the stone still cradled in his hand. “No,” she whispered. “Luck had nothing to do with it.”

He was on one knee, the stone still in his hands. It pulsed faintly, its warmth no longer searing but steady — a quiet rhythm that matched the beat of his own heart.

[System Notification: Artifact bond established.] Designation: *Stone of the Seven Sons* **Link: Active. Synchronization: 100%. Commencing stabilization...**

Al winced as light bled through his veins — thin, luminous lines tracing up his forearms like circuits made of fire and moonlight. The air crackled, faint distortions warping the edge of his outline. His heartbeat slowed, then steadied.

[System Notice: Anchor achieved.] Dimensional displacement reduced. Physical and metaphysical forms synchronized with local plane.]

He exhaled sharply as the dizziness in his head cleared. The weight that had been pressing on him since he arrived — that sense of half-existence, of being slightly out of sync with the world — was gone. For the first time since he'd fallen into this place, *he felt solid.*

Rhyosyn's voice trembled behind him. "That shouldn't be possible. No mortal can hold a Stone of Power. It should have devoured you."

Al rose slowly, the light fading from his arms. "Guess I bite back."

The System tone chimed again, softer now, almost reverent.

[System Update: New questline unlocked.] Title: *Legacy of the Seventh Son* **Objective:** *Uncover the origins of the Seven Stones. Restore balance between the lost sons of fire and the fading world.* **Reward:** *Unknown.* **Warning:** *This questline supersedes all local class progressions.*

Al blinked at the message, his head swimming. "Supersedes class progression? What the hell does that even—"

[System Response: You are no longer classified as Outlander.] New designation: Native Anchor — Class undefined. Attributes stabilizing.]

The air shimmered again. His earlier conjured gear—the pistol, the flashlight, the compass—flashed briefly in and out of visibility, then reappeared beside him in perfect order, as though recognizing him anew.

"Okay…" he muttered, breathless. "That's new."

The light from the stone dimmed further, until it was no brighter than a heart's ember. When he looked down at it again, it had changed shape slightly — the once-smooth surface etched with faint lines, almost like seven overlapping sigils spiraling inward.

Rhyosyn stepped closer, her expression a mixture of awe and apprehension. "You've bound it. You *are* bound to it."

"Feels that way," Al said, flexing his hands. The afterglow still burned under his skin. "Feels like… gravity. Like the world finally stopped spinning."

She studied him carefully. "Do you understand what you've done?"

"No," he admitted. "But it feels like the start of something."

The System pulsed again, faintly in his vision:

[Quest accepted: Legacy of the Seventh Son. First directive: Find the others.]

He frowned, the words echoing in his mind long after the glow faded. “Others?”

The cavern groaned softly around them. Somewhere deeper within, the hum began again — slower, heavier, as though something far older had heard the awakening.

Rhyosyn’s eyes snapped toward the sound. “You’ve woken more than the stone, Marine.”

Al holstered his pistol, still staring at the artifact. “Then we’d better move. Whatever’s coming… it’s probably not here to congratulate me.”

As they turned to leave, the last of the stone’s light sank into his chest, leaving only a burning sensation over his heart — warm and silent, but alive.

[System Note: Anchor confirmed. Power pathways stabilizing.] Warning: Dormant entities attuned to artifact signature.]

The voice faded, replaced once more by the slow, rhythmic pulse of the cave — no longer just sound, but presence.

Al looked back once at the chamber, at the shattered rock where the stone had been. “Seven sons,” he murmured. “Guess I’m one of ’em now.”

Rhyosyn’s whisper followed him as they ascended back toward the surface. “No,” she said quietly. “You may be the first.”

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Chapter Thirteen

CHAPTER 13

Gunny Howard ran his finger along Rack Three, checking each weapon's position by touch before he ever looked at the serials. You didn't run an armory with your eyes. You ran it with your hands.

The armory smelled like it always did: CLP, Cosmoline, and the faint metallic tang of ordnance that had never quite washed out of the concrete.

"Glock 21, serial ending four-four-two-eight," he said.

"Check," Corporal Diaz called from the clipboard.

"Next. Four-four-two-nine."

Howard's hand stopped. The slot was empty.

He looked down. The molded rack held a perfect impression where the pistol should have been, but the weapon itself was gone. Not misplaced. Not shifted to another slot. Just *gone*.

"Hold inventory," Howard said.

Diaz looked up. "Gunny?"

"I said hold." Howard checked the adjacent slots. Four-four-three-zero was present. Four-four-two-seven was present. The empty space sat between them like a missing tooth. "When did you last physically verify this rack?"

"Zero-eight-hundred, Gunny. During morning muster. I counted every weapon."

"And four-four-two-nine was here."

"Locked and tagged, Gunny. I swear it."

Howard didn't swear. He didn't raise his voice. He pulled the master key from his belt and unlocked the cage door, stepping inside the rack line. The padlock on Rack Three's security bar was sealed, the hasp unbroken. The tamper-evident tape he applied every Monday—his own signature in black Sharpie—was intact.

He stepped back out. "Check the other racks. Look for four-four-two-nine out of sequence."

They searched for twenty minutes. Diaz and Lance Corporal Reeves checked every slot, every shelf, the floor, the overhead storage. Howard stood in the center of the armory and slowly turned in a circle, cataloging exits. Two doors: the main entrance with its cipher lock, and the emergency exit with the alarmed crash bar. Both showed secure. The vent overhead was twelve inches square—too small for a cat, let alone a pistol.

"Gunny?" Reeves stood at Rack Seven, face pale. "I got another one missing. Four-four-three-one. Glock 21."

"Show me."

Reeves pointed. Same rack type. Same empty slot. Same intact security.

Not fear—violation. His armory was a vault. His armory was a church. He was its high priest. And someone had walked through the walls.

"Seal the room," he said. "Nobody enters. Diaz, get the duty officer. Reeves, I want sign-out logs for the last seventy-two hours, and I want the security footage from the corridor outside."

"Yes, Gunny."

"Move."

He spent three hours trying to prove he was wrong.

Howard reviewed the logs himself—every checkout, every return, every signature. Nothing for either serial number in fourteen days. The security footage showed the armory door opening at 0745 for morning muster, at 0830 for Diaz's inventory, and not again until Howard himself entered at 1030 for the scheduled quarterly inspection.

No one had gone in or out with a pistol case. No one had gone in or out at all.

He inspected the locks. No scratches. No magnetic residue. No sign of electronic bypass. The cipher lock logged every entry by time and code: 0745, 0830, 1030. Three entries. Three legitimate purposes.

"Gunny?" Diaz hovered at the door. "Sir, the Captain wants to know if he should postpone the range schedule."

"Tell Captain Yates I'm conducting an investigation and I'll report when I have something to report."

"Yes, Gunny."

Howard sat on the ammo cans and looked at the empty racks. Two weapons. Same model. Sequential serials. Vanished from a locked cage in a locked room under video surveillance.

He was still sitting there when the armory door clicked.

Howard was on his feet, hand on his Beretta, before the door finished opening. Reeves stepped through, and the Lance Corporal's face was wrong. Not frightened. *Confused*.

"Gunny. Sir. You need to see this."

"What?"

"Rack Three, Gunny. I was doing the seal check like you ordered, and..." Reeves swallowed. "They're back, sir. Both of them. I didn't touch them. I just saw them and came got you."

Howard pushed past him. Walked to Rack Three. Looked down.

Two matte-black Glock 21s sat in their molded slots. The security bar was still locked. The tamper tape was still intact. The tags hung from the triggers with their serial numbers facing up: 4429 and 4431.

He didn't reach for them. Not yet.

"Diaz," he said quietly. "Get Captain Yates. Tell him I need five minutes in his office. Now."

Yates looked like a man who hadn't slept in a week, which meant he'd probably slept fine and just hated paperwork. He sat behind his desk, hands folded, listening as Howard stood at parade rest and reported.

"Two weapons, sir. Glock 21s, .45 ACP. Vanished from a secured rack at approximately 0830 hours. Reappeared at 1345. No sign of forced entry. No log discrepancies. No video evidence of access." Howard paused. "I inspected them before coming here, sir. They're warm."

"Warm?"

"Recently fired, sir. Both weapons. I could smell the cordite when I cleared them."

Yates closed his eyes. "Jesus, Gunny."

"There's more, sir." Howard's jaw tightened. "They weren't cleaned. Carbon fouling in the breech face. Copper residue in the bores. Whoever used them..." He almost couldn't say it. "They didn't field-strip. Didn't even run a patch. Just put them back on the rack dirty."

"Maybe they were in a hurry."

"No, sir." Howard's voice dropped to that dangerous register that made lieutenants find excuses to be elsewhere. "A Marine knows you don't store weapons wet. This was negligence. Or..." He searched for the word. "Resignation. Like they didn't expect to bring them back. Or knew it wouldn't matter."

Yates leaned back. "Gunny, if I write 'spontaneous teleportation' in a report, they'll send a psych eval before they send an investigator."

"Then give me something else to write, sir."

"Can you prove theft?"

"No, sir."

"Can you prove unauthorized access?"

"No, sir."

"Can you prove *anything*?"

Howard held Yates's gaze. "I can prove those weapons were in my locked armory at 0830, gone at 1030, and back at 1345 with fresh firing residue and uncleaned bores. That's what I can prove, sir."

Yates rubbed his temples. "Install cameras."

"Sir?"

"In the armory. Cover every rack, every angle, every door. If someone's screwing with us—if there's some kind of..." He waved his hand. "Some kind of hole in our security—I want it on tape."

Howard nodded. "Aye, sir."

"And Gunny?" Yates looked up. "Check those weapons again. Forensic detail. If they were fired, I want to know where, when, and at what. Ballistics, residue analysis, the works."

"Already planned, sir."

Howard turned to leave, then stopped at the door. "Sir. One more thing."

"What?"

"The magazines, sir. Both weapons had partial loads. Seven rounds remaining in one, four in the other." Howard's face was stone. "Standard capacity is thirteen. Someone fired six rounds from one weapon, nine from the other. Stopped. Didn't reload to full. Just... stopped."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning controlled pairs, sir. Three threats, or one threat with a failure drill. Discipline. Whoever used these knew exactly what they were doing." He paused. "And they didn't clean their weapon afterward. Which means they couldn't. Or they were somewhere they didn't have supplies. Or..." He shook his head. "I'll get those cameras installed, sir."

He stepped into the hallway. Behind him, Yates sat staring at the empty box on his desk—the box Howard had brought as evidence, containing the smell of cordite and the impossible.

Howard walked back to the armory, already planning camera angles, already writing the report in his head. But he kept seeing those empty slots. Those warm barrels. The carbon fouling that no Marine would leave.

And he kept wondering: *Who returns a stolen weapon?*

And *why do they keep borrowing mine?*

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Chapter Fourteen

CHAPTER 14

The sound came first—deep, rhythmic, like something vast shifting beneath the earth. Pebbles rained from the ceiling as a low vibration rolled through the tunnel.

"Move!" Al shouted.

They didn't need to be told twice. The group turned and sprinted for the upper passages, the cavern walls throbbing with a red light that flared every few seconds. Dust billowed in the narrow corridors as they ran, boots striking stone in panicked rhythm.

When they finally reached one of the higher tunnels, the shaking slowed to a tremor. They stopped just long enough to catch their breath.

Pryce rounded on Rhyosyn, her hair wild, her expression furious. "What in the Crown's name *was that?* What did he do?"

Rhyosyn's hands were shaking, though she tried to hide it by tightening her grip on her staff. "He bound the Stone of Seven Suns—no, *Sons.* The artifact recognized him."

"Recognized him?" Pryce spat. "He's an *Outlander,* a stray man from the sky! How could a relic older than the kingdoms know *him?*"

Catrin leaned against the tunnel wall, her face pale but her voice steady. "Maybe because he's what it was waiting for."

"Don't speak nonsense," Pryce snapped. "There is no such thing—no prophecy, no record—nothing that speaks of *men* being chosen."

"There *is*," Rhyosyn said quietly. "Not in the common scriptures, but in the Forbidden Codex. It speaks of the *Seventh Line*—sons born in cycles, carrying echoes of something ancient. It was dismissed as allegory."

Evan frowned. "Sons? As in… children?"

Rhyosyn nodded, her green eyes burning with thought. "Seven bloodlines bound to creation. When the world was young, they were said to hold dominion over flame, sky, stone, water, life, death… and the path between."

"And you think he's one of them?" Pryce demanded.

“I *know* he is,” Rhyosyn said. “The stone didn’t just react—it obeyed. It *chose.* No mortal can touch a relic like that and live, let alone bind it.”

Pryce threw up her hands. “You’re saying a *man* now carries a power meant for gods? It’s absurd!”

Catrin’s voice cut through the argument, low and controlled. “Absurd or not, he’s alive—and stronger than before. You felt it, didn’t you? The shift in the air. The magic recognized him.”

“Or corrupted him,” Pryce hissed.

Evan turned, looking back down the dark passage they’d fled. “Argue later. Whatever woke down there is still moving.”

The floor trembled faintly again, dust drifting from the ceiling.

Rhyosyn exhaled slowly, trying to steady her thoughts. “If he is what I think he is—if the Seventh Line still exists—then the Triumvirate must be told.”

Pryce glared at her. “You’d bring this to them? Do you think they’ll *thank* us for delivering something that could undo the balance of the crown?”

“The balance is already undone,” Rhyosyn said, her tone turning grim. “The stone awakened. That means the others will too.”

Catrin pushed off the wall, her gaze following the distant glow of Al’s flashlight farther ahead in the tunnel. “Then we’d best decide now—do we protect him, or kill him before anyone else learns what he is?”

The silence that followed was sharp as a blade.

Pryce’s jaw clenched. “Men aren’t meant to carry that kind of power. You know what happens when they do.”

Rhyosyn didn’t answer right away. Her gaze drifted upward, to where faint threads of dust still drifted from the cavern roof. “Maybe,” she said softly, “that’s exactly why he was brought here.”

The tunnel shuddered again, louder this time. From deep below came a sound like the grinding of stone on bone—something old and hungry stirring in the depths.

“Debate later,” Catrin said. “Run now.”

They did.

And as they fled upward toward the faint promise of daylight, none of them noticed the faint, seven-pointed glow burning through Al’s shirt as he ran ahead — steady, calm, and waiting.

The tunnel spat them out into the pale light of afternoon. For a moment, none of them spoke — they only ran, boots pounding across the shale as

they reached the small hollow where the horses were tethered.

The animals were already restless, stamping and snorting, eyes rolling white. The air behind them pulsed with that same low resonance, like a storm caught underground.

“Mount up!” Catrin barked.

They swung into their saddles just as a tremor rolled through the ground. The hillside cracked open in a brief, shuddering breath. Dust burst from the cavern mouth, chasing them as they spurred their mounts into motion.

The narrow trail wound through the foothills, sunlight flashing off armor and hair as they rode hard. Al’s horse—borrowed, half-trained—snorted and fought his grip, but he leaned forward, heels pressed, guiding it by instinct.

No one spoke for the first few miles. Only the rhythmic thunder of hooves and the steady pulse of his heartbeat—no, *the stone’s* heartbeat—filled his ears.

Finally, Pryce broke the silence, her voice sharp enough to cut through the wind. “This is madness! The Triumvirate will have our heads for this! You realize what it means if word spreads?”

Rhyosyn’s hair whipped around her face, her expression grim. “It means the world is changing, whether the Triumvirate wills it or not.”

“Changing?” Pryce spat. “You saw what he did! A man binding a relic of creation? It’s an abomination!”

Evan rode alongside them, her horse steady despite the rough terrain. “If it’s an abomination, it’s one that just saved our lives. That cave was ready to collapse. If he hadn’t taken the stone, it would have taken *us*.”

Catrin’s tone was cool, her eyes fixed on the ridgeline ahead. “She’s right. The resonance was climbing. Whatever power that thing held, it was reaching a breaking point.”

Rhyosyn’s voice dropped to a low murmur, half to herself. “It didn’t break. It *chose*.”

Pryce snapped her head toward her. “Don’t start that again. No relic chooses. They’re inert—echoes of lost power bound by spellcraft. You sound like one of those cultists.”

Rhyosyn’s gaze flicked briefly to where Al rode ahead of them, the faint glow still visible through his torn shirt — seven points of light pulsing beneath the fabric. “And yet,” she said quietly, “there he rides, alive.”

Pryce’s jaw tightened. “Alive doesn’t mean blessed. I’ve seen cursed things walk and breathe.”

Catrin let out a dry laugh. “You’d call him cursed, yet you’d be the first to use him if it suited your ends.”

“That’s enough,” Rhyosyn snapped. “We don’t know what he is yet.”

They fell into uneasy silence again, the sound of hooves filling the gaps where trust should have been.

Ahead, Al slowed his mount and looked back, his expression unreadable. The wind caught his words and carried them back to them: “You all might want to save your breath for the next few miles. I don’t think that cave’s done with us.”

They glanced over their shoulders.

The mouth of the cavern still smoked in the distance — a thin column rising into the sky. And just before the wind shifted, they all heard it again: a deep, hollow resonance rolling out from the mountain, echoing across the valley like a single colossal heartbeat.

Rhyosyn’s knuckles whitened around her reins. “Seven Sons…” she whispered. “The old prophecies weren’t about stars. They were about *blood.*”

Pryce looked at her sharply. “You think he’s one of them?”

“I think,” Rhyosyn said, eyes narrowing, “that if he is, the world just changed—and the Triumvirate won’t like it.”

The horses thundered down the ridge, the sky ahead painted in the last red light of day.

***

They made camp in a hollow beneath a stand of wind-twisted pines, the last glow of sunset dying behind the ridge. The air was cold and damp, carrying the scent of stone dust and iron.

A small fire burned in the center of the ring, throwing uneven light across the group. The horses grazed just beyond the circle, restless but calm enough for now. No one spoke at first. The only sound was the steady crackle of the fire and the distant rumble from the direction of the cavern.

Al sat apart from the others, his back against a rock, the Stone of Seven Sons resting in his hands. Its light had dimmed to a faint, pulsing blue — more heartbeat than flame. He turned it slowly, watching the way it seemed to drink the firelight and give back its own quiet glow.

Across from him, Catrin finally broke the silence. “What manner of devil are you?”

The words snapped across the fire like a whip.

Al looked up slowly. “Devil?”

“Yes.” Catrin’s voice was sharp, but her eyes betrayed unease. “No man could have touched that relic and lived. No man could have bent it to his will. You walked into a place of death and woke something that was meant to sleep until the end of days.”

Rhyosyn’s gaze flicked toward her, warning, but Catrin pressed on. “You should be ash, Outlander. So what are you really?”

Al exhaled through his nose, the corner of his mouth twitching. “I’m just a man.”

Catrin snorted. “Men don’t do what you did.”

“Maybe not in your world,” he said quietly, “but in mine, we’ve done worse.”

That silenced her for a moment. Even Pryce, who had been pacing the edge of the firelight, stopped.

Rhyosyn’s tone softened, curious despite herself. “You said you could *read* the stone. What did you mean by that?”

Al turned the relic in his hands, the blue light tracing faint patterns across his palms. “When I touched it, it wasn’t words. It was like… knowing. It told me what it was — or maybe I just understood it.”

“Understood?” Pryce repeated.

He nodded. “The writing etched into it wasn’t about the sun. You keep saying ‘Stone of Seven *Suns.*’ But it’s not ‘Sun,’ it’s *Sons*. It’s not a celestial relic — it’s a lineage. Bloodlines. People.”

Rhyosyn leaned forward. “How can you be sure?”

He met her gaze. “Because it didn’t burn me. It recognized me.”

The words hung in the air like smoke.

Pryce folded her arms, eyes narrowing. “Recognized you? As what?”

“I don’t know yet,” Al admitted. “But it said something about the *Seventh Line*. That there are others. Seven of us. It didn’t say where or when — just that the stones are connected.”

Rhyosyn’s expression turned inward, calculating. “The Seven Sons… bound to the world, scattered by war. If the legends are true, their awakening heralds a new age — or its end.”

Catrin spat into the fire. “Then we kill him now and end it before it begins.”

Rhyosyn shot her a sharp look. “And risk unleashing the stone’s wrath? Even you’re not that foolish.”

Catrin’s hand went to her sword anyway. “You saw what happened in that cave. Whatever he is, he’s not natural.”

Al stood slowly, the stone in one hand, his other raised slightly but not threatening. “You want to know what I am? Fine. I’m a Marine. I was a soldier. I’ve seen what happens when people start deciding who’s human and who isn’t.”

The fire popped sharply between them.

“I’m not your devil, and I’m not your prophecy,” he said. “I didn’t ask for this. But if I’m stuck with it, I’ll figure out what it means before I let anyone else use it.”

For a long moment, no one moved. The fire crackled. The horses shifted nervously in the dark.

Finally, Rhyosyn rose and stepped between them, her voice low but firm. “Enough. We’ll sort this out in the morning. Until then, keep your blades sheathed.”

Catrin hesitated, then lowered her hand. “You’re making a mistake.”

“Maybe,” Rhyosyn said. “But it’s mine to make.”

She turned back to Al. “You should rest. Tomorrow we decide whether to bring you before the Triumvirate—or hide you from them.”

Al gave a weary half-smile. “Somehow I’m not sure either option sounds good.”

Rhyosyn’s lips quirked faintly. “Welcome to our world, Marine.”

As the others drifted to their bedrolls, Al looked down at the stone one last time. Its glow pulsed once—seven slow beats—and then faded into stillness.

[System Notification: Quest updated.] Objective: The First questline Awakened. Await convergence.

He exhaled, rubbing a hand over his face. “Yeah,” he muttered, “I’ll wait. Not like I’ve got much of a choice.”

The wind moved through the pines, low and steady, carrying with it the faint echo of the mountain’s hum — distant now, but never gone.

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Chapter Fifteen

CHAPTER 15

The morning mist hung low over the camp. Pale light filtered through the trees, washing everything in a dull gray. The fire had burned down to glowing coals that pulsed like embers in a forge.

Al sat cross-legged near the edge of the fire, a dented tin cup of something that passed for coffee in his hand. The stone rested beside him on a folded bit of cloth, dim now, its blue light reduced to a faint heartbeat.

He exhaled, then muttered, “Alright, let’s see what you’ve got for me today.”

The faint chime came instantly.

[System Interface: Active.] Name: Aleric Tanim** **Designation:** Native Anchor** **Class:** Undefined **Alignment:** Neutral Human

Level: 1 **Experience:** 400 / 1000 **Health (HP):** 100 **Mana:** 60 **Stamina:** 85

Attributes: Strength – 11 Constitution – 12 Dexterity – 10 Agility – 9 Mind – 10 Wisdom – 8 Luck – 16 Charisma – 9

Trait: *American Magic (Prototype)* **Artifact Linked:** Stone of Seven Sons — Dimensional Stability: +10% — Power Synchronization: Active

Class Advancement: Locked **Skill Tree:** Locked **Status:** Stable

He frowned. “Level one. Figures. I go through hell, pick up a glowing rock that hums in my chest, and I’m still bottom rung.”

Evan had just finished brushing down her horse. She looked over and grinned. “Talking to ghosts again, Marine?”

“Just arguing with my HUD,” Al said dryly.

“Your what?”

He gestured toward the air. The faint blue System text shimmered into visibility for her too. She crouched beside him, eyebrows lifting. “That’s… new. Most of us don’t see readouts like that until we reach second circle.”

“Guess I skipped a few memos.”

Evan leaned closer, studying the glowing words. “Level one, huh? That means the System’s recognized you. You’ve already earned experience—

four hundred marks."

"From what?"

She smiled faintly. "Surviving, probably. Killing goblins, touching cursed relics, arguing with nobles. The System values initiative."

"Good to know it's got a sense of humor," Al muttered.

Evan chuckled. "Here—see those lines? Health, Mana, Stamina. Health isn't quite life. It's a barrier that absorbs most physical harm, but you can still bleed if something hits you hard enough. Mana is your raw magical energy. Stamina's your endurance—run out of that and you drop."

"Got it," Al said, squinting at the numbers. "So HP's basically a personal shield, Mana's the fuel tank, and Stamina's the battery that keeps the motor turning."

She tilted her head. "I have no idea what half of that means, but yes, roughly."

He cracked a grin. "That's American Magic for you. We turn everything into a field manual."

Rhyosyn approached then, her red hair catching the weak light. She looked down at the faintly glowing display, her expression unreadable. "You can open and close the interface at will?"

"Seems like it," Al said. "I just think about it, and it answers."

"That shouldn't be possible without formal binding," Rhyosyn murmured. "The System treats most people as servants, not partners."

"Yeah, well," Al said, closing the menu with a flicker of thought, "back home, we don't do servitude real well."

Evan laughed softly. "You're serious. You think your magic's different because of where you're from?"

"I don't think," Al said, raising one hand toward the coals. "I know."

He focused, remembering the spark he'd conjured the night before. A faint glow flared between his fingers — small, unstable, but real. The System chimed again.

[Prototype Spell Created: Utility – Spark] Power Source: Adaptive Will (American Magic)** **Mana Cost:** 1 **Effect:** Generates a minor ignition source.

The spark danced, caught, and flickered out.

Rhyosyn watched, her lips pressed into a thin line. "No focus. No spellform. Just will."

"Yeah," Al said. "That's the point."

Evan looked delighted. “So your magic just… works when you need it?”

“More like it works if I *believe* it should,” Al said, flexing his hand. “Guess that’s the trick.”

Rhyosyn’s gaze lingered on him. “Belief,” she repeated softly. “That is dangerous magic, Marine. The kind that changes worlds.”

Al looked down at his palm, the faint trace of light fading. “Funny,” he said. “That’s what we called progress.”

The System pinged again, almost like it was laughing with him.

[System Notice: Trait Resonance Increased.] Luck +1.

Evan laughed aloud. “You even get experience for being cocky.”

Al smirked, looking at the rising sun through the mist. “Figures. American Magic runs on attitude.”

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From the edge of the camp, beneath the shadow of a leaning pine, the three noblewomen watched.

The mist was thinning now, curling around their boots like smoke. Al sat near the fire, flicking his hand again and again, producing sparks that danced for a heartbeat before fading. Each one seemed to delight him more than the last, though he tried not to show it.

Catrin folded her arms. “It shouldn’t be possible.”

Rhyosyn’s expression was distant, thoughtful. “And yet it is.”

Lady Pryce made a soft, disdainful sound. “He’s untrained. No sigils, no invocations, no conduit focus. Just *will.* You can’t simply decide to make fire.”

Rhyosyn’s gaze flicked toward her. “Apparently, he can.”

“That’s not magic,” Pryce insisted. “That’s chaos given form.”

Catrin exhaled sharply, watching as Al stood and repeated the trick. The spark flared brighter this time—enough to make the horses shift uneasily. “Chaos or not,” she said, “he channels it better than most apprentices I’ve seen. You saw the way the System reacted—it rewarded him.”

Pryce’s tone was edged with venom. “For arrogance, no less.”

“Confidence,” Rhyosyn corrected. “There’s a difference.”

Catrin turned to her sharply. “You think this is admirable?”

Rhyosyn didn’t answer immediately. Her eyes were still on Al. “I think it’s… interesting. He wields power as though it were a reflex. He doesn’t

ask for it, he simply expects it to obey. And it does."

"That's unnatural," Pryce hissed. "Men are not meant to command power like that. It will warp them."

Catrin's lips twitched faintly. "And yet the System recognizes him. Which means it does not share your opinion."

"Or it's malfunctioning," Pryce shot back. "He's an anomaly. A tear in the weave. The Triumvirate will want him contained."

Rhyosyn's brow furrowed. "Contained—or guided. They've always craved new sources of power. If he truly represents something foreign… he could change everything. Not to mention his bloodline, if it is new… we need to know more about him and this world he comes from."

"Or destroy it," Catrin said.

Pryce folded her arms tighter, her fine rings glinting in the gray light. "A foreigner blessed by a relic that was supposed to be sealed before the founding of the Triumvirate—yes, I can see how that might *destabilize* a few things."

Rhyosyn gave a soft, humorless laugh. "You're afraid."

Pryce bristled. "To be afraid is not unwise. There's a difference."

Rhyosyn's voice softened, thoughtful again. "When he touched the stone, it didn't reject him. It was bound to him. That means his bloodline carries a connection to the old world. Perhaps… older than ours."

Catrin shot her a look. "You think he's one of these Seven Sons?"

"I think," Rhyosyn said quietly, "he might be proof the legends were never just legends. I think there is more to the tales of the past than we know."

Pryce turned away, her tone brittle. "Then he's either a gift from the gods or a test sent to destroy us. And until we know which—he's dangerous."

They fell silent again, watching as Al crouched by the fire and tried to control the sparks, laughing quietly when one flared brighter than he expected.

Rhyosyn's eyes lingered on him, unreadable. "Dangerous," she agreed softly, "but not yet an enemy."

Catrin gave her a sidelong glance. "You sound as though you want to keep him alive."

Rhyosyn's lips curved faintly. "For now. he is not so harsh on the eyes either."

Pryce shuddered faintly, glancing toward the horizon where the mist was burning away. “Pray the Triumvirate doesn’t hear you say that. Or that you would wish to bed him.”

“Perhaps,” Rhyosyn said, her gaze distant again, “they need to.”

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Al sat back on his heels, still buzzing from the spark trick. If a flicker of fire was the training wheels, he wanted to push the System harder — see what else it would hand him when he asked for it straight.

He closed his eyes and pictured a weapon he knew by feel: the longer, heavier pistol he’d used in garrison — an M9-style sidearm, heft balanced, slide serrations worn smooth. Not the tiny thing that had appeared in the cave, but the full-size service pistol, a weapon that would feel right in his hand.

Think bigger, he told himself. *Not just a toy. Give me a proper weapon.*

The HUD chimed in his head like a patient sergeant.

[System Query: Intent confirmed.] Requested artifact: *Service Sidearm (standard issue).* **Estimated volume:** 120 in^3. **Constraint:** Maximum summon volume = **60 in^3**. **Result: Unavailable. Message:** *You are unable to summon an object this large yet.*

The line of text blinked, then faded into the morning air. Al opened his eyes, annoyed more at the cap than at the denial. He pushed again, imagining the service pistol smaller, foreshortened — something that would still ride true.

The air rippled in front of him like heat over asphalt. For a heartbeat a silhouette formed: the outline of a gun, but squat and stubby, almost comical. It dissolved before his fingers closed on it.

Evan, watching, crouched a little closer. “Trying for something bigger?” She asked, half-amused, half-curious.

“Yeah,” Al said. “Wanted the service piece. Guess the system’s got limits.” He rubbed undefined the back of his neck. “Sixty cubic inches, huh? Sounds arbitrary.”

Rhyosyn approached, her gaze sharpening as she read the faint shimmer the System left in the air. “It rejected the summons?” she asked.

“Not rejected,” Al said slowly. “Told me flat I can’t pull anything over sixty cubic inches. Not yet. Says I’m not ‘able’ to summon an object this

large.”

Rhyosyn’s lips pressed together. “Not yet,” she echoed, as if tasting the warning. “Meaning the System will allow it later — or allow it if you change. Both are dangerous promises.”

Al tried to reason with the invisible ceiling. *Experience maybe? Level? Trait sync?* He felt the little internal counters — XP, mana, stamina — like gauges he could nudge. He pictured the rifle he knew best, then shrank it in his mind until it would fit inside that arbitrary box. He imagined components instead of one whole: a barrel, a slide, a frame. He imagined the System summoning parts.

[System Reaction: Partial construct allowed.] Note: *Modular summons permitted. Aggregate mass must not exceed 60 in³. Assembly requires tool proficiency.* **Mana cost (estimate):** 12

A small grin cracked Al’s face. “Fine. Parts then.”

He willed the image of a barrel into being. The air in front of him condensed into a cold, tubular length of metal — about as long as his forearm and narrow enough to meet the limit. It hummed faintly, like a tuned note. He let it fade, then tried again: a compact slide, a tiny stock. One by one the System allowed small pieces to phase in and then back out when he released the thought. Each summoning drew a thin line off his mana pool and left his stamina prickling.

Idris watched silently, expression impressed despite herself. “You’re soldering logic to magic,” she observed. “That’s… not how most of us work.”

“No,” Al admitted. “But it’s how you fix things on the fly.”

The System flagged another prompt he hadn’t expected, floating in his mind like an assessment:

[System Notification: Modular summoning registered.] Benefit: +XP for successful improvisation. **Penalty:** Increased Mana consumption for non-standard conjures. **Recommendation:** *Increase Mind or Skill Slots to improve efficiency.*

Al glanced at his small XP bar — four hundred of a thousand — and felt the stubborn tug: a way forward that was painstaking, not instant. He could grind XP by doing the obvious fights, or he could focus the System’s learning by improvising. Both would cost time and risk.

He tried one more tutor-level experiment: imagine a compact, but functional, shotgun shell. A single round pulsed into being in his palm —

dense, brass casing with a tiny plastic wad. The System allowed it; Al let it sit, feeling the weight, then released it. The blue readout chimed, awarding a small trickle of experience.

[System: +25 XP — Creative Application of Trait: Adaptive Will.]

"Field problem solving," Al said. "That's what American Magic is. It's not ritual. It's need-first engineering. You figure the smallest viable component and you build something that works."

Rhyosyn's fingers toyed with the hem of her cloak, considering. "That explains the pistol in the cave. The System answered a need. It is… pragmatic."

Pryce, who'd been watching with an expression that mixed irritation and calculating curiosity, finally spoke. "So his magic adapts to utility, not ceremony."

"That's the point," Al said. "But the cap means I can't just pull a full rifle out of thin air. Not yet. I have to earn the right — level up, or unlock skills, or whatever the backend wants."

Idris grinned. "Earn your toys the hard way."

Al let out a breath and leaned back on his hands. The morning filtered through the trees. He felt smaller in a way, boxed in by rules he hadn't seen, but also curiously empowered: the path forward was a climb he knew how to make.

He closed his eyes, listened to the System's faint hum, and for the first time since the stone, framed the work ahead like a mission.

[System Hint:] *Practice: Modular Summoning (x5). Reward: Unlock Increased Summon Volume +10 in³.*

Al smiled despite the limit. "Alright," he said to no one in particular. "Field problem: fix me a rifle. One piece at a time."

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Chapter Sixteen

CHAPTER 16

"It's time to ride." Lady Pryce said looking over the man. "It’s a shame we are on short rations." Al looked up from where he was tightening the last strap on his borrowed pack. The woman’s tone was smooth—too smooth—the kind of casual insult meant to test boundaries, not start a fight.

He straightened, meeting her gaze evenly. “I think I can feed mayself,” he said, voice dry.

Lady Pryce’s lips curved faintly, not quite a smile. “Oh, I wasn’t suggesting that *you* starve, soldier. Only that a creature your size might… complicate things. Horses tire. Rations dwindle. And men have … appetites.”

Evan, adjusting her saddle nearby, snorted softly.

“I’m sure I’ll manage, my Lady. Marines need little—just coffee, poor decisions, and a reason to fight.” Al smirked. “That about covers it.”

Catrin swung up onto her horse, the movement crisp and efficient. “Enough chatter. We’ve lingered too long already.”

Rhyosyn, standing by the map case, glanced at Pryce with quiet reproach. “We’ll find a supply post before dusk. There is an old garrison road through the foothills. There should still be a station there.”

“Assuming it hasn’t fallen to ruin like everything else in this cursed valley,” Pryce muttered.

Al pulled himself into the saddle, feeling the horse shift beneath him. He’d ridden before—but rarely. Idris noticed, guiding her mount closer.

“Lean forward a bit on the incline,” she advised quietly. “And if she stumbles, don’t fight her mouth—just keep your heels light.”

He nodded gratefully. “Thanks. Guess it’s been a while since I did anything without an engine.”

That drew some curious glances. Pryce frowned but didn’t ask.

The morning mist had begun to burn off, revealing the trail winding up the pass—narrow, cut into the side of the ridge, with the valley yawning

below. The horses' hooves clattered against the stone, the echoes rolling down into the green depths.

Pryce let her mount fall back until she was beside Catrin, lowering her voice just enough that the words wouldn't carry to the man. "He doesn't belong here. You know that as well as I."

Catrin didn't look over. "And yet the stone bound itself to him. You saw it. We all did."

"Which means he's either chosen or cursed," Pryce hissed. "Either way, he's not ours to keep."

"Perhaps not," Catrin said quietly, eyes on the trail ahead. "But until we know which—he's our responsibility." She said speculatively.

Behind them, Al adjusted his grip on the reins, catching snatches of the conversation but not enough to make sense of it.

He chuckled under his breath. "Short rations, hostile stares, and a mountain road," he murmured. "Feels like home already."

Evan grinned, falling in beside him. "You get used to it, Just remember—around here, the nobles bite harder than the monsters."

"Yeah," he said, glancing toward Pryce's rigid back. "Starting to pick up on that."

The wind shifted, carrying the faint tang of iron and the sound of something distant—metal on stone.

Rhyosyn's head snapped up. "Do you hear that?"

Catrin's hand went to her sword. "Ahead?"

"No," Rhyosyn said, her tone grim. "*Below.*"

The trail curved sharply, the valley floor falling away into shadow — and far beneath, something *moved* where sunlight should not reach.

Al froze in the saddle. His eyes narrowed, scanning the slope. Instinct took over before thought. He reached into empty air — and something shimmered there, coalescing into a compact, olive-drab object no larger than his fist. It was a small metal cylinder with glass at either end, the kind of thing no one in that world had ever seen.

He flipped it open, one half rotating into a slender tube.

Idris's eyes widened. "What in the name of the Triumvirate—?"

Al didn't answer. He brought the monocular up to his eye, elbows steady, peering down toward the valley floor.

The air was heavy with silence, the horses stamping uneasily behind him.

"What is it?" he hissed, not looking away.

“I do not know,” Idris replied, keeping her mount steady. Her gaze flicked toward the object in his hand. “I saw… something appear. What is that device?”

“Monocular,” Al murmured, adjusting the focus. “It lets me see farther.”

He fell silent again, scanning the distance. The glass glinted faintly, reflecting the low sun.

Below, the fog shifted. Through the lens, he caught glimpses — shapes darting between rocks, quick and low to the ground. At first he thought they were animals. Then he saw the glimmer of crude blades, the hunched forms of scaled bodies.

“Kobolds,” he said softly. “At least a dozen. Maybe more.”

Idris stiffened. “Scouts?”

“Looks like it,” he said, lowering the monocular slightly. “They’re fanning out. Trying to surround the base of the ridge.”

The device didn’t vanish when his hand dropped. It stayed, dangling from a cord that hadn’t existed moments before, resting against his chest. Al blinked, realizing only then that the System hadn’t reclaimed it.

He turned it over in his hand, the faint etching of his own unit’s markings still visible along the casing — *USMC, M22 Monocular, Gov’t Issue.*

“Damn,” he muttered. “I didn't think you'd stick around.”

Idris leaned closer, voice low. “You mean you… created that?”

“Summoned it,” Al said. “Didn’t think it would stay.”

Her eyes followed the smooth lines of the device. “That doesn’t look like any relic I’ve ever seen.”

“It’s not,” he said, sliding it back into a pouch that hadn’t been there yesterday either. “It’s a tool. We used them to scout from a distance. Saves a man from walking into an ambush.”

He glanced down the trail again. “And I’m betting we’re about to have one.”

By now, the others had turned their mounts, drawn by the tension in his voice. Catrin rode forward first, her hand resting lightly on her sword hilt.

“What have you seen?” she demanded.

“Kobolds,” Al said. “At least fifteen, maybe twenty. Down there in the rocks.”

Pryce frowned. “And how could you possibly see that far?”

Al tapped the pouch at his chest. “Because I brought the right gear for it.”

Her expression soured. “Gear. Of course. Another word from your world that means nothing.”

Rhyosyn edged closer, her eyes narrowing as she examined the faint shimmer of mana still clinging to the object. “No, Lady Pryce. It means *advantage.*”

Catrin studied him for a long moment. “You’re sure?”

“Sure enough to bet my life on it,” Al said. “Question is, do we keep moving, or set a trap of our own?”

Rhyosyn’s lips curved faintly. “Perhaps your *American Magic* has more uses than fire and noise after all.”

“Yeah,” Al said, rechecking the strap on his saddle. “You’d be surprised what a little observation can do.”

Behind them, the wind shifted — carrying with it the faint clatter of stone on stone.

Catrin drew her sword in one smooth motion. “Then we’ll ride. Eyes open.”

Al slipped the monocular back into its case, the device gleaming faintly in the sun before vanishing into shadow.

Whatever magic the System had granted him, it was adapting — just like he was.

Al knew what he was about to do was dangerous. Dangerous in the petty, precise way of plans that relied on timing and luck: the kobolds were terrifying in close quarters, and the horses—giant, panicked targets—would be slaughtered if the ambush hit them in the pass. The trail they rode hugged the ridge and then doubled back, bringing their column to a place directly above the likely kill-zone. He’d ridden that kind of line before; he’d also seen improvisations in helicopters and convoy tricks that made men laugh until the smoke cleared.

He inhaled and let the memory of a pilot’s offhand story anchor him: a mason jar, a fragmentation round, and a drop through a narrow throat to make the rocks do the shooting for you. It was a nasty trick, stupid and effective, not something you bragged about. It was exactly the sort of ugly solution the Maw required.

He closed his eyes for a second and dredged the image into the System. The HUD answered in a thin, clinical tone.

[System Query: Intent acknowledged.] Requested construct: *Improvised shock device (protected classification).* **Mana estimate:** HIGH

— proceed with caution.

Al swallowed the warning and reached outward. The air in front of him pulsed like a skipped heartbeat. A glass jar—heavy-walled, mouth wide—coalesced into his palm, cool and weighty. He set it on the pommel of his saddle and then, bracing with his legs, let his will shape the second, smaller object: an egg-shaped munition, dull-gray and humming faintly with the System's own blue light.

When it formed, a thin line on his mana bar blinked and then sagged. He felt it in his limbs—a draining ache like a marathon that hadn't ended. The last bit of recent energy pooled at the base of his skull and then slipped away.

Idris, who'd been watching from his flank, made a small noise of surprise. "By the Triad—what is that?" she said.

Lady Rhyosyn's hand went to the haft of her staff. Her face tightened; curiosity sharpened into irritation. "What is this new thing you summon?" she demanded. Up close, she could see the soft pulse of the Stone of Seven Sons reflected in the gray casing of the device.

Al gave her a smirk that didn't cross into arrogance. "A surprise," he said flatly. He tested the munition in his palm; it thrummed in answer, a tremor under his skin. "If I arm this…" He lifted the egg-shaped object so everyone could see its small, harmless-looking silhouette. He kept the language clinical, because that kept him honest. "…it will detonate where it lies, releasing a violent shock in a radius. The idea is to let the drop do the shooting. Put it in a container, drop it through the throat of the pass, and let gravity and momentum do the rest. The glass will shatter, and then—" He did not show them the flash he'd imagined. "—it will hurt whatever's below before they can react."

Pryce's nostrils flared. "You would risk horses and men with that?" Her voice was flashlight-bright with outrage.

"No," Al said, leaning forward in the saddle so his voice stayed low and controlled. "We don't drop it on our horses. We drop it into the narrow throat where the kobolds will funnel. It's meant to buy us the few seconds to ride through before the shock hits them. A tactical nuisance to them, hopefully fatal to enough that they break off."

Rhyosyn's irritation eased into apprehensive curiosity as she studied the jar and the device. "And your mana—" she began, eyeing the faint afterglow around his wrists.

“Nearly bled dry,” Al admitted. “It drained deeper than I expected. If I push again right now, I’ll be useless for a while.” He looked at the monarch of the group—at the women who had every reason to distrust him—and felt the shape of the choice in his chest. “But think about it: kobolds in the pass, horses in the throat. If we don’t do anything, we lose mounts, stores, three or four people could die. This—this could stop the ambush long enough for us to get through.”

Evan’s mouth tightened. “And if it fails?”

“Then it fails loud,” Al said, blunt. “And we improvised badly.” He let out a humorless half-laugh. “That’s the part of the test I don’t want to pass.”

Catrin’s jaw worked as she measured him. “You do this, and you risk more than your mana. You risk the lives of those who carry us.”

Al met her gaze squarely. “I know. That’s why I’ll be the one to set it. If you want to argue morals, do it now. If you want to live, trust the plan.” He caught Pryce’s eye with a defiant tilt. “Or we can ride blind and let them shoot horses out from under us.”

The noblewoman’s expression flickered between contempt and calculation. For a beat she looked as if she might order him stopped, but the tremor in the valley below rolled again—closer, like answering thunder. The wind carried a ripple of small, hungry sounds.

Rhyosyn drew herself up, the staff’s tip catching the light. “Do it,” she said at last, voice tight. “But you swear to me—no unnecessary risk. You fail, and I will end this before it spreads.”

Al slid the jar into the stitched loop on the saddle and eased the munition into it with hands that did not tremble. The glass took the munition’s shape, cradling it like a fragile egg. He could feel the System’s disapproval—an inhuman ledger noting an act outside of ritualized magic—but the Stone’s warmth thrummed against his ribs like someone keeping time.

“Idris, Evan,” Catrin barked, giving orders as the trail narrowed and they reformed their line. “You keep their flanks. Pryce and I will hold the center. Rhyosyn—if he signals, create cover.”

They fell into position like bone and tendon reassembling. The horses snuffed and shifted, feeling the tension. Al looped a line of cord through the jar’s mouth and tied the other end to a short, weighted leather bag—primitive, but heavy enough to tumble over rock. He nodded once to Catrin and nudged his mount forward to the point where the trail bent and the ambush would pin them.

Everything in Al’s training tightened into focus: timing, distance, and the miserable arithmetic of sacrifice. He pictured the drop, the jar shattering on the packed scree, the blast erupting in the narrow throat. He imagined the kobolds’ surprised upturned faces, the scattering of momentum, the few fatal hits that would make the pack break.

He swallowed, felt the last of the mana ache in his chest. Then, with a small, private apology to the gods he didn’t properly pray to, he dropped the weighted cord through a fissure in the trail in the single, brutal second before they rode the bend.

The rock yawned beneath it. The jar disappeared into shadow and then clattered against stone below—the sound muted by the distance, but present. Al jammed his heels and put his shoulder into the mount. The horses surged forward as the kobolds below screamed and the pass erupted.

There was a sick, bright bloom of light and sound far below—a cavernous thunder that took the wind out of his lungs. The blast’s afterwash slapped at their faces and threw small stones like hail. Several kobolds were flung against the walls, others seized by sudden firepower, heads thrown back in a chorus of shrieks.

Rhyosyn’s cover flare rose like a second sun, and Catrin drove her horse hard through the echoing smoke. Evan and Idris kept the flanks clean, cutting down any survivors who scrambled toward the rim.

When the roar faded into a ringing silence, horses snorted and whinnied, some staggering but upright. Smoke curled from the throat beneath them, and the bite of gunpowder mixed with the copper tang of spilled ore.

Al sagged in the saddle, the exhaustion of mana and adrenaline finally crushing down on him. He looked at the nobles—faces streaked with ash and resolve—and felt the thing that had happened both a success and a debt.

Pryce’s lips were pressed so tight they were white. “You damned fool,” she breathed. Then, quieter: “It worked.”

Catrin let out a long breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “Good work,” she said curtly, and it sounded almost like praise.

Rhyosyn’s eyes flicked to the faint blue mark under Al’s shirt and then to the smoking throat. “We buy time,” she said. “But something else woke when that stone came loose. We should not assume this is over.”

Al nodded once. “I already know that.”

Idris swung down from her horse and peered into the smoke-choked throat, the grit on her lips making her look fiercer. “There’s movement

down there," she reported. "But it's broken. They're scattering."

Al let his shoulders drop. He had spent more than he'd planned—his mana was shallow, his hands felt hollow—but the gambit had worked. They had horses, stores, and a route that still carried them forward.

He looked at the jar—now shattered in a shallow scrape at the throat's lip, its fragments blackened and pitted—and thought about all the ugly compromises that kept men alive. The Stone hummed faintly against his ribs, seven slow beats like a promise and a warning.

"Ride," Catrin said. "We move while they're distracted."

They rode on, the smear of smoke behind them, and the world narrowed to the simple, eternal calculus of survival: distance, speed, and the small, dangerous miracles that let them keep going.

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Chapter Seventeen

CHAPTER 17

“What was that… that… thing!” Lady Pryce’s voice snapped across the smoke, sharp enough to cut through the ringing in their ears. Her gloved hand still trembled on the hilt of her rapier.

Al didn’t bother to lower his gaze. He patted ash from his palm and answered flatly, “That was a grenade — used as an improvised explosive device.”

Pryce’s eyes went hard. “A what?” she demanded.

“It’s not some newfangled sorcery,” Al said. “Not an invention in the magical sense. It’s just physics and intent.” He offered a rueful half-smile as the memory of the mason-jar trick settled back into him. “Just a portable bit of war. Simple, ugly, and effective.”

Evan stepped forward, curiosity overriding caution. “A *grenade*?” she repeated slowly. “I have seen fireballs from mages, but that… that seemed so simple.” She squinted at the scorched throat of the pass where the jar had shattered. “It looked like a small thunder, not a spell.”

Al chuckled, the sound rough and tired. “Grenades are very simple: hollow casing, explosive charge inside, and a way to set it off. You can make them from metal, glass — anything that will hold pressure for a heartbeat. When they go, fragments fly and the blast pushes outwards. It’s not pretty.”

Idris wiped soot from her forearm, eyes thoughtful rather than shocked. “So… an artifice that scatters metal and shards.” She said. “I can see the utility. Entering an enemy fortification would be… easier.” Her voice carried a grim acceptance of someone who had known war in many forms.

Catrin, always practical, added, “It makes a breach, breaks morale, and forces defenders to think in seconds rather than hours.” She looked at Al with a new, grudging respect. “You planned that quickly.”

Pryce’s face twisted between moral outrage and cold calculation. “And what of the innocents? The horses? The stores?” Her glance cut to the smoking lip of the pass. “This is reckless.”

Al’s smile faded. “We didn’t drop it on our mounts. We dropped it where they’d funnel. The point was to avoid a long, bloody fight in a place that favored the smaller fighters. It’s ugly, but it’s a choice between a clean, surgical risk and a mess that costs lives.”

Rhyosyn, who’d been watching the darkened throat with a scholar’s detached interest, knelt and ran a gloved finger through a bit of dust. She looked up at the group. “It is fascinating. Your tools are crude, but efficient. A spell that takes hours to weave can be rendered moot by a small piece of metal.” She frowned, considering the implications. “It makes the old equations—magic for power, tools for utility—blur.”

Evan laughed softly despite the soot on her cheek. “The simplicity is almost insulting,” she said, but there was no mockery in it; only the delighted recognition of something useful.

Pryce’s jaw worked. “Useful does not excuse barbarity.” She studied Al with narrowed eyes. “You speak of choices like a man who has killed and had to sleep afterwards. Do you sleep easily, Marine?”

Al shrugged, the corner of his mouth lifting. “Not always. But if sleeping means more of us wake up tomorrow, I sleep just fine.” He glanced down at the faint blue pulse under his shirt where the stone’s mark hid. “War isn’t polite where I come from. We do what works.”

Idris gave a short, wry smile. “We call that pragmatism. Here, we call it dangerous.” She vaulted back into her saddle, loosening her shoulders. “Danger breeds discipline. Discipline wins fights.”

Catrin pushed her horse forward a finger’s length, remounting with fluid motion. “Enough words. We move while the pass is still a mess.”

Pryce hesitated, then drew in a breath and nodded once, rigid. “Very well. But one slip and I will hold you accountable.” Her tone left no room for argument.

Al returned the stare calmly. “Fair enough.”

They fell into formation—Rhyosyn to the rear to watch the hum of the Stone, Catrin and Pryce to the flanks, Evan and Idris close to Al’s side. The horses stamped, the air still smelled of gunpowder and scorched rock; and the valley behind them echoed with the skittering of confused kobolds.

As they urged their mounts down the trail, a thin wind ruffled the maps and the banners, carrying the faint metallic tang of ore and the distant hum of something deep and awake in the earth. The night was coming; decisions had been made. The group moved on, each step carrying the small, terrible

wisdom that in war, sometimes the simplest tools are the most dangerous—and the most necessary.

By late afternoon, the air had turned gold and heavy with dust. The mountain road dipped into a shallow basin where scrub pine grew thick along the ridgeline, and beyond that—rising from the shadows like the bones of an old fort—the timber walls of a stockade came into view. The pennants above the gate fluttered lazily in the wind, each marked with the sigil of the Triumvirate.

The sight brought little comfort. The group had ridden in tense silence since the explosion in the pass. Their mounts were weary, their armor dulled with soot, and though none spoke of it, the morning's battle had changed the rhythm between them. The nobles kept their distance from Al now—not quite fear, but a wary calculation, like they were unsure what to do with him.

Evan broke the quiet first. "Stockade ahead," she said, nodding toward the dark wood walls. "Looks like a garrison outpost. Probably a Triumvirate supply point."

Catrin's gaze lingered on the fluttering banners. "We'll need rest and provisions," she murmured.

Rhyosyn's tone was cautious. "We'll also need a story."

Al frowned. "A story?"

The silence that followed told him more than words. He'd noticed the looks—the small, sidelong glances traded between the women every time a settlement or road marker came into view—but no one had said anything outright until now.

Finally, Evan spoke, her usual humor gone. "What of him?" she asked. "You all know we can't just ride through the gate like this."

Lady Pryce sighed, tension pulling tight across her shoulders. "We cannot pretend to be his sisters," she said sharply. "That's too much of a lie, and too easy to disprove."

"What's the problem?" Al asked, sitting straighter in the saddle. "You've been acting like I'm radioactive since we left the mountains. Let's just say it plain."

The nobles exchanged uneasy looks before Catrin finally exhaled. "It's not you, Aleric. It's… what you are."

"That sounds worse," he said dryly.

Rhyosyn picked up where Catrin faltered. “Men are… rare in this world,” she said, her voice carefully measured. “Extremely rare. The birth of a boy happens only once in fifteen to twenty children, sometimes less.”

Al blinked. “So… like a one-in-twenty chance?”

“Yes,” Catrin said quietly. “One in twenty, and that number has fallen for generations. You’ve seen our cities—our armies. Entire legions of women. It’s not ideology, it’s necessity.”

Rhyosyn’s tone softened, though her eyes stayed sharp. “Men are considered precious, not free. They’re property—protected, guarded, and traded. Their bloodlines are recorded, their health monitored, their movements restricted. A healthy, fertile man of noble birth can sell for tens of thousands of kronar. Even a common man—strong, able-bodied—fetches hundreds.”

Al’s grip tightened on the reins. “Wait. You’re telling me men are *bought and sold?* Like horses?”

Rhyosyn hesitated, but nodded.

He stared at them in disbelief. “What the actual hell?”

The women avoided his gaze. Even Pryce, who usually met every argument with venom, looked away.

“It’s survival,” Catrin said softly. “The balance between life and extinction. The Triumvirate calls it stewardship, but it is… control. No man lives without belonging to a House.”

“Yeah,” Al muttered, bitter laughter under his breath. “And here I thought being drafted back home was bad.”

Evan looked over, her expression a strange mix of pity and amusement. “If the guards in that fort realize what you are, they won’t draft you, Marine. They’ll lock you up and breed you.”

Al’s jaw tightened. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Pryce’s voice was cold and clipped. “Then you will say nothing at all. You’ll keep your head down, your cloak tight, and you will let us speak for you. One unguarded word, and we’ll have a hundred questions we cannot answer.”

He looked at each of them in turn, seeing the worry behind their eyes. For once, it wasn’t arrogance or disdain—it was fear.

“Fine,” he said finally. “You want me quiet, I’ll be quiet. But if someone tries to lay a claim on me, I’ll make sure they regret it.”

Evan grinned faintly, the spark of mischief returning. “Try not to start another war, Marine.”

Al adjusted his cloak, hiding the faint pulse of blue from the Stone of Seven Sons beneath his shirt. The gates of the stockade loomed larger now, voices calling faintly from the watchtowers above.

He sighed. “Yeah,” he muttered, half to himself. “No promises.”

The gate creaked shut behind them with a heavy thud, the sound of iron bolts sliding home echoing like a verdict. Fort Dawnhold wasn’t large—two squat towers and a few rows of barracks—but the air inside the walls felt dense with watchful eyes. Soldiers moved about in pairs, most of them women, all armed.

Al felt those eyes on him as they led the horses to the stables. No words, just lingering glances that stayed a beat too long. He kept his hood low, but he knew he stood out—too tall, too broad-shouldered, his gait not the cautious shuffle of the few collared men he’d seen here.

The Quartermaster met them by the stable doors, lean and hard-faced, ink stains darkening her fingers. Her inspection was quick, but when she got to him her gaze sharpened. “Your escort?” she asked.

“Under House Vaughn’s seal,” Rhyosyn said smoothly.

“Unusual,” the woman replied. “Foreign men are typically… rendered safe before they’re given arms.”

“Rendered safe?” Al asked before he could stop himself.

The Quartermaster looked at him like he’d asked what air was. “Sterilized. Gelded. The Triumvirate learned long ago that unclaimed men are weapons waiting to be stolen.”

Catrin’s hand twitched on her reins. Pryce went pale, eyes darting between the Quartermaster and Al. Rhyosyn’s voice, when it came, was tight. “He is under my personal authority. Record him as such.”

The Quartermaster shrugged, made a note, and left. But the silence she left behind was heavy enough to crush bone.

Al exhaled slowly. “So that’s how it is,” he said, voice flat. “You keep men alive just long enough to control them.”

Catrin’s jaw flexed, the mask cracking for the first time since he’d met her. “You don’t understand what you are here,” she said quietly. “A man like you—whole, unclaimed, unregistered—can shift the balance between houses. The birth of one male child can decide a generation of succession.

The Triumvirate keeps careful count. You're not a person to them. You're *potential*."

Rhyosyn added, almost to herself, "A strategic resource."

Pryce's gaze turned calculating. "If word spreads, you won't last a day without a collar. Every House with an empty lineage will want you—buy you, steal you, breed you."

Evan gave a bitter laugh. "And if they can't have you, they'll make sure no one else can."

Al stared at them, feeling the world tilt beneath him. Back home, he'd been a Marine, one man in a sea of uniforms. Here, he was an asset with a price tag.

"Hell," he muttered, "I've been property before—government issue, serial number and all—but this?" He shook his head. "This is new."

Catrin leaned in, voice low and fierce. "Then listen to me. If we ride into that courtyard with you unregistered, someone will report it by nightfall. You need a claim of protection, or the Fort Commander will have you seized for verification. You must be *spoken for*."

Al's brows furrowed. "Spoken for?"

Rhyosyn's lips pressed thin. "You become ours," she said. "For your safety—and ours. A declared bond under House Vaughn's name. Temporary. Legal."

Pryce's tone dripped with disdain. "Or we let the Triumvirate take him and dissect him like a breeding stallion."

He looked at each of them in turn—their fear, their calculation, their politics—and felt the weight of their world settle over him like a chain.

"Fine," he said finally, the word like gravel in his throat. "If that's what it takes to stay alive, then say whatever you have to. But let's get one thing straight."

He met Catrin's gaze, unflinching. "No one owns me."

The women exchanged glances—uneasy, uncertain. Even Rhyosyn, who'd spoken most gently to him, couldn't quite meet his eyes.

From the parapet above, a bell clanged twice—the evening call. Shadows lengthened across the yard, swallowing the lines between faces and banners alike.

Catrin turned away first. "Then we ride at dawn," she said.

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Chapter Eighteen

CHAPTER 18

They were given a single stone chamber in the south tower, lit by a lantern that hissed and smoked. Outside, Fort Dawnhold settled into the rhythmic clatter of the night watch—boot steps on timber, the creak of the gate chains, the low bark of commands. Inside, the nobles' voices fell to careful, guarded whispers.

They thought him asleep.

Al sat cross-legged in the shadow of a support beam, back to the wall, pretending to adjust his gear. In truth, his attention was split between the flickering light and the murmur of the three noblewomen at the table.

"…must be a false blessing," Pryce whispered. "No male wields that kind of magic. Not without a price."

Catrin's reply was measured, the strategist even in secrecy. "False or not, it's power. The kind the Triumvirate would kill to harness. We need to keep him quiet and hidden until we decide where he belongs."

"Belongs?" Rhyosyn's voice carried a soft heat, the kind that smoldered instead of flared. "You speak of him like a weapon, not a person."

Pryce's tone sharpened. "He *is* both. Look at what he conjured—those weapons, that fire from the air. He's worth more than any ten of our battle-mages."

Catrin sighed. "Worth more or worth dying for. You know what happens to unclaimed males who draw that kind of attention."

Al leaned his head back against the stone, closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly. *So this is what I am now. A topic. A resource.*

He flexed his hand, calling up his System overlay. A faint shimmer rippled through the air—only he could see it. Lines of text scrolled past:

[Summoning Protocol: Stable] [Mana Reserve: 34%] [Inventory Access: Open]

He reached in, pulling out a small brown plastic packet stamped *U.S. Department of Defense – Meal, Ready to Eat.*

The sound of the crinkling wrapper filled the silence between whispers. He tore it open and dug out a spoon. Chili Mac. Not exactly home cooking, but the smell—plastic, spice, and memory—hit him like a punch.

From across the room, Rhyosyn's voice drifted faintly. "If the Triumvirate learns he's intact, they'll never let him go. They'll take him for one of the cribs."

Al paused mid-bite. *Cribs?*

He shifted, the MRE pouch warm in his hand, listening more intently.

Catrin's whisper came next. "We can't let that happen. He'd vanish into a registry before sunrise. He'll be guarded, measured, drained. You've seen it done."

"I have," Rhyosyn admitted, her voice heavy. "And I don't want it done again."

Al set the meal aside, his stomach suddenly in knots. The lantern guttered, casting the room in pulses of shadow and light.

When he looked up, Evan and Idris were just inside the door, settling in for first watch. They'd seen him eating, but neither seemed alarmed—just curious.

Evan gave a low whistle. "You always pull food out of thin air, Marine?"

He gave a faint smile. "American magic."

"Looks terrible," Idris said, crouching near the fire. "Smells worse."

"It's not the worst I've eaten," Al said, forcing humor into his tone.

The guards exchanged a look—half amusement, half unease. Evan leaned her shoulder against the wall and spoke more softly. "You have to understand, some of the women out there…" She nodded toward the window slit, where torchlight moved across the courtyard, "have never seen a man. Not even the one who fathered them."

Al blinked. "How's that possible?"

Evan hesitated, then continued. "The Crown—what's left of it—and the Triumvirate maintain cribs for women of merit. They're taken young, before they cause trouble, and used for breeding. The state owns their seed. Families trade rights like coin." She said this while avoiding his gaze.

Her words landed like small hammer blows.

Idris rolled up her sleeve, showing him a narrow tattoo that ran from wrist to elbow—delicate lines forming a branching tree. "Family registry," she said simply. "It marks our lineage back seven generations. It's how they track inheritance… and blood. Birth defects are something we try to avoid."

She said it plainly, but what went unsaid hung thick in the air. With tens of millions of women and so few men, the odds grew shorter every generation.

Al stared at the ink, the pulse of the MRE heater still hissing faintly beside him. “Jesus,” he murmured. “So you’re all… what, managed breeding stock?”

Evan gave a humorless smile. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. It’s just how the world works. Is yours not that way?”

Al looked down at the steaming pouch, then back at them. “You call that surviving. Back home, we called it captivity.”

Neither woman answered. The silence stretched, broken only by the clink of Idris setting her sword down beside her.

After a long moment, Evan sighed. “Get some rest, Marine. We’ll take the first watch. The nobles want a guard rotation in case the Fort gets curious.”

He nodded, lying back against the stone floor, eyes open to the wavering lantern light above.

In the corner, his half-eaten MRE sat cooling beside the heater pack. He couldn’t help thinking the smell of it—salt, plastic, and home—was the only real thing left in the room.

As the quiet settled, one thought dug in deep, cold, and sure.

I’m already trapped. The only question is how long it takes them to admit it.

The fire in the brazier had burned down to dull orange coals. The guards whispered softly near the door, their voices blending with the wind outside and the creak of the tower’s beams.

Al lay half-awake on the rough blanket they’d given him, staring up at the low ceiling. He’d been trained to rest anywhere — in Humvee seats, on sand, or on the floor of cargo planes — but here, sleep refused to come.

The numbers kept turning over in his head. *One man for every fifteen… maybe twenty women.*

To some, it would sound like a fantasy — the kind of locker-room joke soldiers made overseas when the boredom got too deep. But here, in this world, it wasn’t a fantasy. It was a prison.

He rubbed a hand over his face, feeling the faint buzz of the stone beneath his shirt. *Fifteen to one,* he thought again. That wasn’t opportunity — that was scarcity, weaponized. A breeding ratio. A ledger entry.

Yes, he wanted a family someday. A wife, maybe kids — little hands smudging the walls, toys in the hall, a life with *choice.* But this? This world didn’t have families. It had *programs.*

He exhaled slowly, the air cold against his teeth. *I'm not a stallion, nor a prize bull or a bloodline investment.*

I'm a man.

Back home, they’d taught him the worth of that — the duty, the discipline, the line between freedom and servitude. He’d fought to protect that line. And now here he was, in a world that measured men by fertility and the strength of their seed.

He turned over, watching the embers fade. Evan and Idris murmured near the door, their tones quiet and professional. Every few minutes, one of them would glance back to ensure he was still there—not as a comrade, but as a *responsibility.*

A rare resource.

He rolled the words in his mind like pebbles in his hand. They felt wrong. Heavy. Cold.

He could almost hear the nobles’ earlier voices echoing in the silence: *He belongs under my seal. My protection. My claim.*

“Not yours,” he muttered under his breath, eyes half-closed. “Not anyone’s.”

The wind rose outside, carrying the scent of rain and pine through the arrow slit. The fort settled into its night rhythm—the sound of boots, the distant crackle of torches, and somewhere far off, a wolf’s cry echoing through the valley.

Al lay still, his muscles tense, his mind racing through everything he’d seen and heard since waking in this world.

Fifteen women to one man. And every one of them a reminder that, in this place, freedom was rarer than gold.

I can't even think of one woman I want to be with, much less…

***

The first pale light of dawn crept through the arrow slits, turning the tower’s walls from black to slate. A cold draft slipped through the cracks, carrying the damp smell of old timber and horses.

Al sat up slowly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. The brazier had gone out sometime before dawn, and the room was filled with the hushed sounds of armor being buckled and leather straps drawn tight.

Catrin was already fully dressed, her cloak clasped at her throat, sword belted. Rhyosyn stood near the window, murmuring a spell to chase the chill from her gloves. Pryce was pacing, lips thin, her expression sour as the early light.

The guards—Evan and Idris—had been up before any of them. Their armor gleamed faintly with dew from the ramparts, and their eyes were alert but weary.

“Up, Marine,” Evan said, tossing him a folded cloak with the Vaughn crest stitched small on the inside. “We ride at first bell. Best you look the part before anyone from the garrison gets curious.”

He caught the cloak, pulling it over his shoulders. The fabric was heavy, expensive compared to his uniform. It didn’t fit, but it concealed his frame well enough.

“Still feels like dress-up,” he muttered.

Rhyosyn turned from the window. “It’s survival,” she said. “Better to wear a noble’s colors than end up in the registry.”

Al looked between them, sensing the tension that had deepened overnight. “So, which one of you won the argument?”

Pryce’s jaw tightened. “House Vaughn will carry the claim,” she said curtly. “For appearances only. It’s less likely to raise questions from the mages’ courts than a soldier’s seal or a merchant’s signature.”

“Lucky me,” Al said dryly. “Do I get a say in any of this?”

Catrin adjusted her gloves, avoiding his gaze. “You’re alive, aren’t you? That’s your say.”

He snorted. “Hell of a democracy.”

Evan shot him a quick look—half warning, half sympathy—as she cinched her gauntlet strap. “Best not to test their tempers before breakfast, Marine.”

Outside, the fort was already stirring. The sound of boots and shouted orders drifted up from the yard. Women soldiers moved between stables and barracks, their hair braided tight, their faces marked by the calm focus of discipline. Al didn’t see a single man among them.

Rhyosyn crossed to the table, pulling a folded parchment from her satchel. The seal of House Vaughn glimmered faintly in the dawn light.

“This is your temporary contract,” she said, her tone as clinical as a doctor’s. “If questioned, you are listed as a bonded escort. House property.”

Al stared at her, silent for a long moment. Then he took the parchment, folded it once, and shoved it into his pocket. “Fine,” he said finally. “House property it is.”

Pryce frowned. “You seem ungrateful for someone who’s just been granted protection.”

He looked up at her, his voice calm and even. “I’ve been under protection before. Usually meant someone else decided when I lived or died.”

That silenced her.

Idris appeared in the doorway, helmet under one arm. “Gate patrol’s changing shift,” she said. “If we move now, we’ll get through before the quartermaster gets nosy.”

Catrin nodded. “Mount up. We ride for the valley road.”

The group gathered their gear quickly, but before they stepped out, Evan paused beside Al. Her voice was low and careful.

“You did well to stay quiet last night,” she said. “If you keep doing that, you might just see another sunrise.”

He gave a short nod. “Working on it.”

As they stepped into the yard, the air bit cold and clean. Mist hung low over the fort walls, curling around the horses’ hooves. The soldiers at the gate stopped to stare as they passed—not hostile, just curious.

Al felt every pair of eyes follow him until the gate closed behind them and the sound of the fort faded into the mountains.

Only then did he breathe easier.

But even as the road opened before them, the words from the night before wouldn’t leave his head. *Fifteen women for every man. Cribs. Registries. Breeding lines.*

He adjusted his reins, the cloak brushing against his knees. “Free,” he muttered under his breath. “I’m still free.”

But the echo that came back from the mist didn’t sound convinced.

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Chapter Nineteen

CHAPTER 19

The morning mist clung to the horses' legs as they descended the narrow road from Fort Dawnhold. The sun had yet to clear the ridges, and the air was sharp with pine and cold stone.

Al shifted in his saddle, still uneasy under the heavy House Vaughn cloak. "Where are we headed?" he asked, keeping his tone neutral but wary.

Catrin glanced back over her shoulder. "We were assigned to Aelthar's Maw by decree of the Triumvirate," she said. "Rumors spoke of a cult — dragon worshippers, necromancers, or worse. It was deemed significant enough that no single House was trusted with the task."

Pryce gave a dry laugh. "Be fair, Catrin. They thought we'd fail. Sending heirs from three rival Houses was convenient—no one House would lose face when we died. If we lived, they'd all take credit."

"That's politics," Evan muttered from behind them. "Same wherever you go."

Rhyosyn's expression was distant, her red hair catching a glint of sun through the fog. "We return now to report to our Lady Mothers—each of whom serves the Triumvirate's will in her own way."

Al frowned. "So you're part of this Triumvirate?"

Catrin shook her head. "No. Our mothers serve them, but are not of them."

Pryce adjusted her reins, her tone shifting to something almost academic. "Think of the Triumvirate as three crowns balanced on one head. They share rule: one of Blood, one of Law, one of Faith. Together they embody what remains of the old Crown."

Al frowned. "So who's actually in charge?"

Rhyosyn smirked. "No one. Which is why everything takes twice as long as it should."

Catrin shot her a look, then sighed. "Let me try to explain more plainly. The Triumvirate sits above all — three Ladies Sovereign who govern jointly. Beneath them are the Courts — the noble Houses who enforce their

decrees and administer the provinces. And beneath the Courts, the Clergy — the temple orders, the healers, the keepers of records and faith. Each claims to serve the Crown."

Al squinted. "And the Crown is… what, exactly?"

Rhyosyn's voice took on that smug lilt she used when she thought someone slow. "The old royal bloodlines — what's left of them. None of the current Houses carry enough pure lineage to claim the throne outright, so they share the illusion of unity."

"So basically," Al said dryly, "you've got three rulers pretending to take turns, a bunch of nobles pretending to listen, and priests pretending to keep them honest."

Rhyosyn turned in her saddle to look at him, brows arched. "You put it crudely, but… yes."

Evan chuckled. "He learns quick."

Pryce's tone turned chilly. "Cynicism suits you poorly, foreigner. You live because we protect you—remember that."

"Hard to forget," Al said.

The group fell silent again, the only sound the steady clop of hooves and the occasional creak of leather. The mist was burning away now, revealing rolling ridges below them, and the long valley road that would lead back toward the Triumvirate's heartland.

Al glanced sidelong at Rhyosyn. "So we're going to report to your bosses."

She gave a small, humorless smile. "Our mothers," she corrected. "And through them—to theirs."

He nodded slowly. "And I'm guessing none of them are going to be happy about what you found in that Maw."

"No," Catrin said softly. "Nor about what we brought back from it."

Al didn't answer. He didn't have to. They all knew exactly what she meant.

***

The Hall of Three Crowns

The capital shimmered in morning light like a city half-dreamt — towers of white marble rising from mist, bridges strung between them like silver threads. The banners of the Triumvirate hung motionless in the high air:

crimson for Blood, blue for Law, gold for Faith. Below, courtiers and petitioners moved through tiled courtyards under the watchful eyes of armored wardens — all women, their spears catching the sunlight like shards of glass.

At the apex of the Citadel, beneath a vast dome painted with constellations, three thrones sat upon a single dais of obsidian. Each was carved in the likeness of its dominion: the first shaped like a coiled serpent of gold, the second a pillar of interlocking scrolls, the third veiled in hammered silver filigree.

A courier burst through the side doors, armor dusty from flight. Her kestrel still clung to her shoulder, feathers ruffled, eyes wild from the long journey. She dropped to one knee before the dais, holding up a sealed scroll bound with the crest of House Vaughn.

“Your Ladyships,” she said, voice breathless but steady, “word from Aelthar’s Maw.”

The Lady of Blood — tall, iron-haired, her crimson gown patterned with the sigils of every noble house — extended a jeweled hand. “Read.”

The courier broke the seal and began, her voice echoing across the chamber. “Mission successful. The corruption within the Maw was purged. The cult scattered. Survivors: Lady Catrin of Arwen, Lady Elowen of Pryce, Lady Rhyosyn of Vaughn, and two retainers. Casualties minimal.”

A low hum of approval rippled through the gathered aides and advisors. Then the courier hesitated.

“There is… an additional note, my Ladies.”

The Lady of Law adjusted her spectacles, eyes narrowing. “Continue.”

The courier swallowed. “They report… a man.”

The word fell into the hall like a stone into still water.

A hundred whispers stirred at once. Advisors leaned to one another, faces pale, hungry, or calculating.

The Lady of Faith’s veiled head tilted slightly. Her voice was quiet, musical, and cold. “A man? Alive?”

“Yes, my Lady. Foreign by their account. The quartermaster reports that she believes him to be unregistered, and unclaimed.”

The Lady of Blood sat forward, rings glinting like drops of red glass. “Unclaimed? Then he is wild. That cannot stand.”

“Indeed not,” said the Lady of Law. “A rogue male could upset every balance we have built in these generations.”

“Or,” murmured the Lady of Faith, “he could be providence.”

Silence followed — sharp, heavy.

The Lady of Blood’s tone cut through it like a blade. “We will see which. Summon their mothers. The daughters return under escort. And send a warden cohort to the border—quietly. No rumors. No panic.”

The Lady of Law nodded once. “And if the man resists?”

The Lady of Blood smiled faintly, the expression colder than steel. “He is a man, he will be taught the meaning of obedience.”

The Lady of Faith’s voice drifted from behind her veil. “No. Not obedience. *Purpose*.”

The hall fell silent again save for the flutter of the kestrel’s wings as it took flight, circling once above the throne before vanishing through the open dome.

Far below, the city’s bells began to toll — not in alarm, but in summons. Somewhere in the winding streets, clerks were already drafting orders, and in the noble quarter, messengers ran with sealed letters marked only by a single sigil.

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Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20

"What do you know of your family?" Evan asked casually as they rode, though Aleric caught the faint stiffness in her shoulders. He'd seen her speaking with Lady Pryce and Catrin earlier that morning—heads bowed close, voices low, deliberate secrecy. Whatever this was, it wasn't casual.

He offered a half-smile, pretending not to notice. "Not much," he said. "Told you about my mom already. No brothers or sisters—at least not through her. My dad… she never talked about him. I've got an aunt and uncle out west, a couple cousins, but they live half a country away."

Idris, riding just ahead, turned slightly in the saddle. Her tone carried genuine curiosity. "Half a country? How large is this country of yours?"

He chuckled softly. "Bigger than you're probably used to. I don't know what you know about geography, but on the Earth I come from, there are seven continents."

"Seven?" Idris repeated, brows knitting. "You speak as though that were remarkable."

"It is," Aleric said. "At least compared to what I've seen here. Ours are massive landmasses separated by oceans—North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Antarctica, and Australia."

The women exchanged puzzled glances at the last name.

"Australia?" Evan echoed, tasting the unfamiliar word.

He smiled faintly. "Yeah. Big island continent in the southern seas. Lot of desert, strange animals, hotter than hell. You'd like it."

They looked unconvinced, and a little unsettled.

"I can draw you a rough map later," he offered. "We call this one North America—that's where I'm from. My country covers most of it, from one ocean to the other. Roughly five thousand miles across."

Rhyosyn slowed her horse to match his pace, watching him with open fascination. "Five thousand miles… of one nation?"

“Yeah,” he said, glancing toward the ridgelines ahead. “We lived in Kansas—flatlands, farms, nothing but sky. My Aunt Marjorie and Uncle Earl lived up in Spokane, Washington—that’s way in the northwest, near the mountains.”

“Such distance between kin,” Idris murmured. “Do you never see them?”

“Not much,” Aleric admitted. “The world’s big, and people get busy.”

Evan’s look was half curiosity, half pity. “In our world, family is never far. Bloodlines are everything.”

“Yeah,” Aleric said quietly, eyes on the horizon. “I’m starting to get that.”

When he said he didn’t see them often, it wasn’t because travel was hard—it was the time involved. They had vehicles where he came from, faster than horses. The roads were incredible, made from a kind of liquid stone that hardened smooth. People could cross whole states in wheeled machines and barely feel the distance.

Evan frowned, glancing back at him. “Liquid stone? You mean clay?”

“Not quite,” he said with a small grin. “It was poured hot and flattened as it cooled—made travel easy. But that wasn’t the impressive part. We also had machines that could fly. Through the sky.”

Rhyosyn turned in her saddle, eyes narrowing as if deciding whether he was joking. “Fly? You mean… like a bird?”

“Exactly like that,” he said. “Only faster. Hundreds of miles per hour.”

They stared at him in stunned silence. Even Idris, who had been listening quietly, looked momentarily uncertain.

“Hundreds?” she repeated slowly. “How could anything move so fast and not tear itself apart?”

“Engineering,” he said. “And fuel. Lots of both.”

Evan gave a nervous laugh. “You sound as if you come from a realm of mages and skycraft. You speak of these things as if they’re common.”

“They were,” he admitted. “Everyone used them. Some people spent more time flying than walking.”

For a while, no one spoke. The clop of hooves filled the silence, the sound almost primitive beside what he’d just described.

He knew the translation magic—whatever it was—made the words clear, but not the meaning. He doubted they could picture a jet engine or a highway any more than he could imagine the kind of sorcery they called everyday life.

Still, he caught himself smiling faintly. People had said the same thing about cars a century earlier—horses were good enough; who needed more? Then the world changed overnight. Maybe this one would too.

“And you know this… engineering?” Rhyosyn asked at last, her tone measured, as though fearing the answer.

Aleric laughed softly. “Not really. I knew the basics, but I was more of a creative than a tech guy. So no, I didn’t understand the math that made it all work.” He paused, thoughtful. “Don’t get me wrong—I could probably build you an airplane, in theory. I know the shape the wings would need, how air moves over them. But I couldn’t build the engine to power it. Without that, you’d just have a very expensive glider.”

“Glider?” Evan echoed, brow furrowing.

“Yeah. Think of a bird with no feathers and no flapping—just coasting on the wind.”

“And this… ‘balloon’ you spoke of?” Rhyosyn pressed, leaning forward now, curiosity overcoming skepticism.

“Hot air balloon,” he said with a grin. “Big silk envelope filled with heated air—the air inside gets lighter, so it lifts off the ground. You hang a basket underneath and ride the wind wherever it takes you.”

The women exchanged incredulous looks. Idris muttered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like a prayer.

“That sounds suicidal,” Evan said finally.

“It usually wasn’t,” Aleric replied with a shrug. “Usually.”

Their laughter was short and uneasy, but it broke the tension that had hung since morning.

For a time, they rode with him talking and them listening, their questions tumbling over one another. He told them about the harnessing of electricity, about engines and turbines, about ships that crossed oceans made not of wood but steel. About computers that could talk, and screens that could show the whole world in a single image.

He kept his explanations simple—comparisons, metaphors—but even so, their expressions flickered between disbelief and awe.

At one point, Rhyosyn murmured, “Your world must have been filled with gods.”

“Just people,” Aleric said quietly. “People who got very good at breaking things down and putting them back together.”

Silence followed, thick and thoughtful.

He smiled faintly, glancing down the winding road ahead. “I wish I’d paid more attention to the show *Connections*,” he said. “Would’ve made me sound smarter right about now.”

“Connections?” Idris asked.

“Yeah,” Aleric said, chuckling. “Old documentary. About how one invention leads to another—chain reactions through history. Funny how I’m in one now.”

Evan tilted her head, curious. “And what invention do you represent, Marine?”

Aleric looked up at the sky—impossibly wide, impossibly alien—and sighed. “Honestly? Probably the mistake someone’s still trying to fix.”

He trailed off mid-sentence, his eyes narrowing. Something on the horizon caught his attention—a flicker of motion where the road curved into a low stand of trees.

He straightened in the saddle. “Hold up.”

The group slowed, hooves crunching over gravel and sparse grass.

“What is it?” Catrin asked, her hand drifting to the hilt of her sword.

Aleric didn’t answer at first. He swung his pack around, reached inside, and drew out a compact black box—his binoculars. The lenses gleamed faintly as he twisted the focus knob and brought them to his eyes.

The world leapt closer. The ridge ahead sharpened—the rutted path, scattered boulders, and there, half-concealed among them, the telltale shapes of men. No… not men. Figures crouched low, small and wiry, weapons in hand. The faint shimmer of movement where none should have been.

“Goddamn,” he muttered.

He lowered the binoculars, scanned again with his naked eyes, confirming the angles. Classic L-shape. Kill zone dead center. Whoever set it up knew what they were doing—or had watched enough to learn.

“What do you see?” Rhyosyn asked, her voice calm but tight.

He handed her the binoculars. “Take a look—just past the third boulder on the right. You’ll see a few shapes tucked in close. Might be bandits, might be something worse. And see that fallen tree on the left side of the path? There’s movement behind it.”

Rhyosyn hesitated, then took the strange object gingerly, as if it might bite. She raised it to her eyes and gasped softly. “By the gods… you can see them. Clear as daylight.”

“Yeah,” Aleric said grimly. “Field glasses. Tool for scouting. Pass it to your swordswoman—she’ll see what I mean.”

Catrin accepted the binoculars, adjusting them until the scene snapped into focus. Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Ambush,” she confirmed. “They’ve picked the perfect spot. Narrow road, loose gravel, no room to turn the mounts quickly.”

“Someone’s learned tactics,” Aleric said. “And they’re not amateurs. They’ve got spacing, line of sight, probably a rear element waiting to close in once we’re boxed.”

Evan frowned. “How do you see all that from here?”

“Experience,” he said simply. “And a bad habit of assuming the worst.”

He looked back toward the group. “We’ve got maybe a quarter mile before we’re in range. Best to dismount, move off the road, and flank them from the rise.”

Catrin lowered the binoculars slowly, studying him with new respect. “You sound like a commander.”

“Just a Marine,” Aleric said, scanning the ridge again. “But trust me—walking into that mess head-on would be suicide.”

The women exchanged glances. For once, no one argued.

Catrin nodded. “Then we follow your lead, Marine.”

Aleric adjusted the strap of his cloak and took a steadying breath. “Alright then,” he said quietly. “Let’s ruin somebody’s morning.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

CHAPTER 21

Al paused, the road and the line of trees sharpening in his mind like a target. He needed them to understand two things: he could fight, and he would not be owned. The thought sat cold and simple in his chest, the kind of stubborn logic that had kept him alive in more than one firefight.

He closed his eyes for a moment and reached. The System answered like an old, grudging friend — not with explanation but with the thing itself. A SIG P228 solidified in his palm, metal warm from nowhere; he let it sit there, feeling the balance, then drew another. Quietly, almost reverently, he produced a pair of suppressors and screwed them on to the muzzles. The metal made a muted thunk as it seated; nothing technical, only the unstoppable fact of it being there.

“Marine,” Evan said, amusement and warning braided in her tone, “that’s an evil smile on your face.”

He grinned without humor. “These are evil tools,” he said, low. “But sometimes the right tool is the only way to get the job done. If they go off clean, the horses don’t scream and bolt. If they go off loud, we lose half our mounts before we even hit the choke.” He checked the pistols’ balance once more, then slipped them into holsters he’d summoned earlier — snug, accessible, and oddly ceremonial.

Catrin’s face remained unreadable, but the quick nod she gave was permission enough. Pryce’s jaw hardened; the look she shot him promised calculation rather than anger. Rhyosyn watched, curiosity fracturing into something like respect. “You bring instruments of war into a place that calls them demons,” she murmured. “And yet you use them like a surgeon would — craft and care.”

Al swung himself into the saddle, the weight of the weapons a quiet comfort at his hips. He let the reins fall light over the mare’s neck and signaled the others. “All right,” he said, voice steady. “Let’s ride.”

They fell in, formation tightening like a fist. The road narrowed, trees drawing a darker roof over them. As the fort receded behind and the valley

opened out before them, Al felt the odd, urgent clarity of a man who knew the stakes and had made his choice. He would not be property. He would not be hidden. If the world wanted to take him, it would have to take him from a man who could fight back.

They rounded the last bend and slipped into the kill zone like a blade into cloth. Rocks and scrub pocketed the light; the road pinched to a narrow throat hemmed by fractured boulders. The geometry screamed ambush — the L-shaped trap, the dead space at the base of a fallen oak, a sliver of motion where small shapes hunched and waited.

Al's hands were already moving before anyone could shout. He palmed the first of the twin pistols at his hips, feeling the comfortable weight and the familiar snap of metal he'd never owned until this morning. He didn't need the monocular again; he'd seen enough. He took one clean breath, centered, and let the System balance the edges of his will.

When he brought the gun up it was black and small in his hands — ordinary enough to make no one gasp — but fitted with matte suppressor. The muzzle pointed like the eyes of a calm animal.

"No sudden moves," Catrin hissed, already sliding her blade free. Around them the noblewomen shifted, weapons whispering from sheaths, horses tensing. Evan and Idris tightened to Al's flanks, faces knotted with readiness.

Al squeezed the trigger.

The reports were not thunder. They were small, dry pops — staccato whispers that folded into the wind. No horses screamed. No riders flinched. The first two rounds tore through shadow and struck the nearest ambusher full in the flank; a wet, startled sound and a tangle of scales collapsed against the stone. The creature's crude spear clattered free and skittered down the slope.

Two more clicks — two more precise, measured shots — and another ambusher pitched forward, a thin, surprised shriek cut off as it struck rock. The ambush, built on silence and surprise, found both chevrons missing. The planned first volley never came.

"Move!" Al barked, and Catrin answered like a blade drawn. She dug her heels, drove her mare to the low shoulder, and the formation flowed around the natural cover. Rhyosyn threw up a shimmering screen of light — not flame, but a radiance that caught on the sharper edges of rock and left little

faces squinting and blinking. The flash bought them visibility and chaos in equal measure.

Evan and Idris poured from the flanks, swords low, cutting down any scaled attacker that tried to lunge. Pryce's rapier flashed and took a spear cleanly; one goblinoid collapsed, its mouth forming a thin, high wail. The suppressed fire kept speaking: tidy, surgical little bursts from Al's wrists that found hollows and gaps — throats, shoulders, the soft underscales where a shot ruined balance but did not make a spectacle.

There were other sounds beyond the popping: the thud of small bodies against stone, claws scrabbling for purchase, a chorus of panicked squeals — and beneath it, the metallic rasp of crude weapons hitting rock. One of the ambushers, realized and frightened, spun and ran; another tried to scramble toward a fallen tree, but Evan was already there, blade arcing in a clean downward motion.

Al didn't spray. He conserved. Each shot was a decision, a geometry of consequence. He watched how the line broke — how one wrong step sent two scrambling together, how confusion was the enemy's worst wound. When a scrawny figure lunged from cover with a rusty dagger, Al already had his second pistol out after dropping the empty first it barked twice. The creature crumpled, no longer a threat.

The suppressors did their job. The horses shifted, some skittering their hooves, but none bolted. The pack behind them held; that, more than anything, was a small miracle in a choke like this. The road's narrow throat had been turned into a trough of stunned creatures and scattered weapons.

Rhyosyn's spell licked the far side of the choke, a wash of light that kept emergent threats pinned. Catrin used the window Al's fire opened and rode through the disrupted line hard, sword low, forcing the survivors to turn or be cut down. Pryce, ever the precise blade, walked through the center with clinical efficiency, leaving attackers clutching at broken limbs. Evan and Idris moved like practiced hands, shielding Al and cutting any flank that tried to regroup.

When the smoke and dust thinned into a thin, shimmering haze, the ambushers were either fleeing into the scrub, whimpering, or lying still in the dust. A few would never rise. The kill zone lay littered with crude spears and torn leather; the air tasted faintly of copper and the sour tang of fear.

Al let the pistols drop to his sides and felt the burn of exertion in his chest — the System's cost written in the tired ache of his limbs and the faint

dimming of the HUD at the edge of his sight. A line of text only he could see winked once: *Experience: +15. Mana reserve: -34%.*

Catrin's horse halted beside him. She didn't smile, but something like approval softened the hard line of her mouth. "You kept the beasts quiet," she said. It came out almost like praise.

Pryce's face remained cool, but the tremor at the corner of her mouth gave the lie to her composure. "Efficient," she said finally. "Brutal, but effective."

Evan grinned, ugly and quick. "Best kind of fight — the kind with fewer screams." She spat to the side and nudged her mount.

Idris wiped her blade and looked at Al as if measuring a new ally. "You fight like a dozen of us," she said. "Not bad for a one-man storm."

Rhyosyn stepped closer, tracing the air where the flashes had been as if reading ripples. Her expression folded respect into a question. "Dangerous," she said softly, "and controlled. Those two seldom travel together."

Al slid the pistols back into their holsters, motions practiced and steady. They reformed, horses snorting and stamping, and rode on — the valley a little quieter, their path a little more certain. Behind them, where the ambush had been set, the night felt emptier, the small fires of the attackers sputtering into the rock. Ahead, the road unrolled, and the knowledge of what they'd survived settled over them like armor.

Al looked back at the heap of fallen creatures, then sighed. "This flashing light is getting on my nerves. Can someone explain what it actually is?"

"That's the System notification," Lady Pryce said, wiping her blade clean with the same efficiency she used to sign orders. "Acknowledge it and it will open. It tells you what it has chosen to tell you — new skills, changes in aptitude, the measure of your experience. After this fight, it's hardly a surprise that yours would be active."

Al frowned. "Where does this System even come from?"

That stopped them. The question was simple, but it landed like a thrown stone.

Rhyosyn glanced at Catrin, who in turn looked toward Pryce. None of them seemed eager to speak first. Finally Catrin said, "The clergy say it's the will of the Crown made manifest — the voice of the world keeping tally of worth."

"The Courts claim it's older than the Crown," Pryce countered. "A relic of the First Age, when the gods still walked among us. They say it was

forged to bind magic to order — so that talent would not destroy the world a second time."

"And the scholars," Rhyosyn added with a wry smile, "think it's simply there. Like the sun or the tides. Something we live under, but do not understand."

"So nobody knows," Al said.

Evan gave a low chuckle. "Exactly. We just follow the rules and try not to make it angry."

He exhaled, half a laugh and half frustration. The glow still pulsed faintly at the corner of his vision. With a thought he focused on it, and lines of pale script unfolded in the air — numbers, words, and unfamiliar symbols.

[COMBAT LOG — UPDATED] Hostiles Defeated: 15 (goblin & kobold variants) **Experience Gained:** +215 XP **Bonus Awards:** +10 XP — Tactical Execution, +50 XP — Leadership Initiative **Total Earned:** +275 XP **Cumulative Total:** 695 / 5,000 XP **Progress:** 14% toward next Level **Prestige Path:** *American Mage — 695 / 5,000 XP* **Note:** *Non-native energy signature remains stable. Integration progressing.*

He scrolled with his eyes, frowning. "So I'm still a long way from what it calls leveling."

"Three thousand marks the first threshold," Catrin explained. "It takes that much for the System to decide you're more than a fool with a sword. From there, it scales higher."

Al let out a low whistle. "Three thousand… that's a lot of fools with swords."

Evan laughed. "Welcome to our world, Marine. It doesn't hand out blessings easy."

Rhyosyn glanced back toward the path where the bodies lay cooling. "The System hungers for deeds, not waiting. Keep moving, keep fighting, and it will feed you power soon enough."

He wasn't sure if that sounded like encouragement or a warning. Maybe both.

Catrin glanced over at him. "It will come faster than you think."

He wasn't sure he liked the sound of that.

"You cannot be that far," Idris scoffed, wiping her blade on a bit of cloth. "You've slain more beasts than I can count. When I took my first level, it came after a single day of heavy campaigning—" She drifted off, frowning as memory carried her somewhere half proud, half grim.

Al looked back down at the shimmering text still hovering faintly before his eyes. “It says I’m fourteen percent away from receiving my first level. Six hundred and ninety-five of five thousand XP.”

Lady Rhyosyn was in the middle of a sip from her waterskin when she choked. She turned, coughing into her sleeve, eyes wide. “*Five thousand?*”

“Yeah.” Al glanced up, more confused than anything. “That’s what it says.”

The scholar blinked hard, as if she’d misheard. “No novice begins with such a burden. A first level comes at one thousand points—three thousand for certain specialized callings. Five thousand…” She trailed off, incredulous. “That’s the sort of weight reserved for a *Heroic Path*, not a base class. Even the Crown’s chosen rarely see that threshold.”

Evan leaned on her sword, grinning despite the tension. “Guess that means the System thinks pretty highly of him.”

“Or,” Pryce said sharply, “it doesn’t think of him at all. Perhaps it’s testing whether an Outlander can even *reach* that first rung.”

Catrin’s expression softened a fraction. “Or perhaps it wants to see if he’ll survive long enough to matter.”

Al gave a low whistle. “Five thousand just to start climbing. That’s one hell of a probationary period.”

Rhyosyn muttered something under her breath in old tongue—half prayer, half curse. “No wonder your magic is unbound. The System doesn’t know what to make of you.”

He closed the window with a blink, and the glow vanished. “Story of my life,” he said dryly. “Every system I meet thinks I don’t belong.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

CHAPTER 22

"I've talked about my world," Al said as the horses picked their way down the narrow ridge trail. "Tell me about yours."

He kept one hand on the reins, the other resting across his thigh where his pistol holster would have been if it still existed here. Every so often he'd bring the monocular to his eye, scanning the twisting road ahead, letting the others hear the faint click of its focus ring as he swept the ridgelines.

"Like where do the monsters and things come from?" he asked.

For a while, only the wind answered — sighing through sparse pines, carrying the scent of stone and rain. Then Catrin spoke. "No one agrees," she said simply. "The priests say they are the remnants of sin made flesh. The scholars call them echoes — failed creations left over from when the System was first forged."

Rhyosyn snorted softly from the back of the column. "And the mages know better. They're mana-blooms — places where wild magic festers too long without order. Give it a few decades and it grows teeth, claws, and a hunger."

"So monsters are just… bad weather that learned to bite?" Al said.

Evan chuckled under her breath. "Something like that."

He frowned, turning the monocular toward a dark cut in the valley below. "And they've always been around?"

Pryce's tone went cool, as it often did when a conversation turned toward history. "Not always. The records speak of quieter centuries, but every few generations the balance shifts. The System… corrects itself."

"Corrects," he echoed, tasting the word. "Like a machine purging an error."

The nobles said nothing to that.

He lowered the glass, thoughtful. "Hell of a world you've got. I thought mine was dangerous."

Behind him, Rhyosyn leaned closer to Pryce, voice dropping to a whisper meant for the other woman's ears. "He speaks of the System as if it were

something built. He even uses its words—*error, purge.* Did you hear?"

Pryce's reply was equally low. "I heard. And I saw what he summoned. That was no spell, no conjuration of mana I recognize. Whatever his *American Magic* is, it answers him as if it knows his mind."

"You think it's tied to his world?" Rhyosyn asked.

Pryce nodded slightly. "Or worse — that his world is tied to *ours.* We've seen men blessed, but never one blessed *from without.*"

"Should we report it?"

Pryce's green eyes flicked toward the Marine riding ahead, scanning the trail again with that strange metal eye in his hand. "Not yet. The Triumvirate would cage him the moment they heard. Better to learn what we can before that."

Al called back without turning around. "You two done whispering about me, or do I need to start charging rent for the space I'm taking up in your heads?"

Rhyosyn smiled despite herself. "You have a sharp ear, foreigner."

"Comes with the job," he said, lowering the monocular. "I've had to listen for things that wanted me dead before. Some of them even had better manners."

The others laughed lightly, though tension still hummed beneath it. The trail curved again, and in the distance, thunder rolled somewhere behind the mountains.

For a moment, Al thought he could almost hear another sound riding beneath it — a deep, rhythmic pulse in the stone, like the slow heartbeat of the world.

Rhyosyn could tell the man was brooding. Her mothers had always said it was dangerous when men fell into that kind of silence — it meant they were thinking too much or not at all, and neither ended well. But she also knew the other ladies would object if she tried to wipe his bad mood away in the *old* ways her mothers had taught her.

A pity. It would've been simple, direct, and left them both smiling.

Instead, she kept her hands to the reins and her tongue still, watching the muscle in his jaw tighten and loosen as he rode. His questions kept coming — quiet, clipped things that betrayed how foreign he really was. Why did it matter to him where their ancestors had landed eight or nine centuries ago? Or why their cities still clung to the coast like barnacles on stone? The answers were common knowledge, unremarkable.

But he asked as if he were fitting pieces together — as if the truth mattered in a way it never had to anyone else. That troubled her. It also made her curious.

She studied his shoulders — broad, tense, scarred in a way no man of her world ever would be. The mark of someone who'd earned his strength rather than been chosen for it.

Perhaps she could learn something by turning the questions back.

"Tell me of your scholars," she said at last, guiding her mare closer.

He turned slightly in the saddle, brow raised. "My scholars?"

"Yes," she said. "You ask so much of ours — the courts, the temples, the records. What of yours? Who are the ones who keep knowledge where you come from?"

Al blew out a slow breath and rubbed at his chin. "That's a tough one. We don't really have 'temples of learning' the way you do. We've got universities — big places where people argue about everything from math to philosophy to why the hell the sky's blue. We've got scientists too, they're like engineers but meaner and with better funding."

"Science," she echoed the strange word carefully. "A kind of magic, then?"

He laughed under his breath. "Something like that. Just slower, with more paperwork. It's how we learned to fly, talk across oceans, cure sickness. But we never called it magic."

Rhyosyn tilted her head, fascinated despite herself. "You learned to fly. As birds do?"

He smirked. "As machines do. We built wings out of metal and fire."

That earned him a long silence. She could feel Pryce and Catrin's attention shift from behind them, the weight of it pressing between her shoulder blades. Even Evan and Idris exchanged a quick glance.

"Your people," Pryce said finally, her tone sharp, "sound less like men and more like gods who forgot their place."

Al didn't rise to it. He just looked ahead again, scanning the horizon with that same calm vigilance. "Yeah," he said quietly. "That's what we thought too. Right up until we remembered what it costs to play god."

The words hung in the air like smoke — and for a while, no one spoke at all.

"And how did your people play god?" Rhyosyn asked softly.

Al didn’t answer at first. His eyes stayed fixed on the trail ahead, the reins loose in one hand. The light was fading — a low amber glow spilling across the rocks — and for a heartbeat she thought he might pretend not to have heard.

Then he exhaled, long and slow. “We forgot the important question,” he said finally. “We stopped asking *should* and only asked *can*.”

Rhyosyn watched a muscle twitch in his jaw. He was remembering something — she could see it in the way his focus drifted inward, the way his knuckles whitened around the reins. Whatever he was seeing, it wasn’t this mountain trail.

“Machines,” he said after a moment. “Weapons, engines, things that could level cities from half a world away. We told ourselves it was progress. That it would make life easier. Safer.” He gave a hollow laugh. “We got real good at killing and called it civilization.”

No one spoke. Even Pryce, whose tongue was usually sharp enough to cut steel, stayed silent.

Rhyosyn glanced toward the others but their expressions told her enough — this man’s words were heavier than they understood. They weren’t meant as confession or boast; they were memory.

When he finally looked up again, his eyes had gone distant and cold, reflecting the dying light. “You ever wonder,” he said quietly, “if the gods left because they got tired of cleaning up after us?”

Rhyosyn’s heart gave a small, uneasy twist. “In our land,” she said, “we believe the gods left because we stopped listening.”

“It’s not that God’s not listening,” the young man said. “He’s always listening. Sometimes, though, the only answer He can give is silence. Sometimes we have to be thankful for the prayers not answered.”

The words hung between them like smoke, heavy with meaning neither of them could quite name. The horses kept their slow, steady pace, hooves clicking against the stones. Rhyosyn found herself watching him, wondering what kind of prayers he’d made — and which ones he’d learned to live without.

Night settled over the valley, slow and heavy. The fire crackled low, throwing long shadows against the stones. Beyond the circle of light, the mountains swallowed every sound but the occasional whicker of a horse or the sigh of the wind.

Al sat a little apart from the others, hunched over something metallic that gleamed faintly in the firelight. Every so often there was a soft click or a whirr — the sound of pieces fitting together, of a mind that couldn't be still.

Rhyosyn watched him from across the flames. The others had fallen into their usual rhythms: Pryce pretending not to stare, Catrin sharpening her sword with deliberate precision, the guards murmuring softly as they took first watch. But Rhyosyn's thoughts were elsewhere.

She was turning over fragments of things the foreigner had said — stray pieces of conversation that didn't quite fit, until now. He'd spoken of *science*, of *machines that could fly*, of *weapons that could level cities*. He'd said his people had built wings of metal and fire… and something else.

We made our own sun, he'd quipped once, almost offhand, back when she'd thought it was a metaphor. But now, in the quiet between heartbeats, she wasn't so sure.

Her gaze flicked toward the faint outline of his hands working over the strange device. The light glinted off something small and round — smooth metal with markings like runes, but etched too perfectly, too evenly to be human craft.

She thought of the stories — old myths told by the priestesses of the Crown. Tales of the *Fallen Sun*, of a people who had burned the sky and called it glory. The myths said it was punishment, not invention.

She shivered.

"Something wrong, Lady Vaughn?" Pryce's voice drifted across the fire, smooth and lazy but sharp beneath.

Rhyosyn blinked and forced a small smile. "Just thinking."

"Dangerous habit," Pryce said, poking at the fire with a stick. "Especially where he's concerned."

Rhyosyn didn't answer. She looked back at Al — the soldier from another world, his eyes half-shadowed, his face lit by the slow pulse of emberlight. He looked nothing like a god. But maybe that was the problem. Maybe the last ones hadn't either.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

CHAPTER 23

The hills softened as they rode east, the jagged ridges giving way to rolling pasture and smoke-colored mist. Fences appeared first — splintered posts and wire-twine clinging to the land like forgotten promises — then the faint scent of hearth-smoke carried on the wind.

“More settled lands,” Catrin announced, though she said it like a warning rather than relief. “We’ve reached the marches of Atherai’s heart.”

Al adjusted in the saddle, taking in the distant glimmer of rooftops. “Atherai,” he repeated, testing the name. “That’s what you call this place?”

Rhyosyn nodded. “The Far Land. The last continent our ancestors claimed. Two hundred and fifty years since the first banners were planted, give or take.”

“Only two-fifty?” Al frowned. “That’s young. You stopped expanding?”

“We stopped *surviving*,” Pryce corrected. “Too few births, too many deaths. Even the crown can’t breed soldiers out of air.”

Evan spat into the dust. “And too many of the old tribes still hold the wilds. The goblins have their canyons, the kobolds their tunnels, and worse things hide under both. The first settlers called them monsters. The tribes call *us* invaders.”

Al looked out across the fields, where the wind bent long grass in waves. “Sounds familiar,” he murmured.

Rhyosyn gave him a curious look. “Your people fought such tribes as well?”

“Not the same,” Al said. “But the stories rhyme.”

They rode on in thoughtful silence, the rhythm of hooves blending with the faraway clang of a blacksmith’s hammer. Every mile seemed to pull them closer to something that looked like civilization — roads laid in gravel, wagon tracks, the faint shimmer of mana-lamps along the horizon — yet Al couldn’t shake the feeling they were still on the edge of a frontier that wanted them gone.

Behind him, Pryce and Rhyosyn spoke in low tones about the history he'd just learned.

"He asked *when* the expansion stopped," Rhyosyn murmured. "Not *why.* He's thinking like a soldier."

Pryce's lips curved in a thin smile. "Then perhaps he'll see what our generals refuse to: Atherai isn't waiting to be conquered. It's waiting to be understood."

The young Marine had seen far better roads in Afghanistan. Hell, he'd seen better roads *bombed flat* in Afghanistan. Still, he had to remind himself those roads had been built for cars and convoys, not hooves.

Here, the road was barely more than a pair of ruts carved through red-brown soil, the center line choked with wild grass. Yet as Al looked closer, something about it nagged at him. The wheel base was familiar — close to what a compact car might've used. The spacing wasn't quite even, but it was too deliberate to be random.

He crouched for a moment, fingers brushing one of the grooves. "Iron rims or wood," he murmured. "You've got carts coming through here, but not often enough to keep the track clean."

The women exchanged looks at his strange, matter-of-fact tone.

"Clearly," he added, standing again, "some of your people get along with the natives — the goblins, kobolds, whoever else — given how deep those cultists were dug in. Can't run that far inland without somebody's help."

The words dropped into silence. Rhyosyn's brow furrowed, Pryce's mouth drew tight, and even Catrin's grip on her reins stiffened. None of them seemed to have considered the possibility.

"That… has not been recorded," Catrin said at last.

"Doesn't mean it hasn't happened," Al replied. He nodded toward the distant haze where faint rooftops broke the horizon. "What city is that anyway?"

"The borderward holding of Caelvarn," Pryce said after a pause. "One of the fort towns. The last civilized waystation before the Green Divide."

Al nodded, committing the name to memory. "Caelvarn," he repeated. "Got a ring to it. Guess I'll find out what civilization looks like around here."

The walls were old — locally quarried limestone, from what Al could tell. The blocks were rough-cut but fitted tight, seams sealed with the kind

of care that came from generations of maintenance, not pride of design. What the place lacked in grandeur it made up for in sheer presence.

They rose at least fifty feet by his estimation, maybe more — high enough to make him wonder how many sieges it had taken before someone decided taller was safer. The surface was pitted, worn by wind and rain, the pale stone darkened in streaks where runoff had carved lazy rivers down its face.

A broad gate stood ahead, barred with iron and flanked by towers crowned in banners that barely moved in the still air. The sound of hooves echoed off the stone as they approached, drawing curious stares from the guards posted above.

“So what happens now?” Al asked, glancing toward the women.

The ladies exchanged uncertain looks. Pryce’s chin lifted, but it was an act of habit rather than confidence. Catrin’s fingers drummed on her pommel; Rhyosyn’s gaze shifted between the gate and the soldiers watching them from the parapet.

“I suppose,” Catrin said finally, “we report our success — or what passes for it.”

“And what about me?”

That question drew silence. Pryce’s lips pressed thin. Rhyosyn’s eyes softened a fraction, but she said nothing.

Evan cleared her throat. “Protocol says we deliver all findings to the commandant. That would include… *him*.”

“‘Findings,’ huh?” Al muttered. “Glad to know I rank just above evidence and just below a horse.”

Idris shot him a quick, sympathetic glance. “It isn’t personal, Marine. You’re… complicated.”

Al looked up at the looming gate and the shadows moving behind the battlements. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s one way to put it.”

The gate creaked as it began to rise, the sound of chains rattling through the air. The fort beyond came into view — narrow streets of stone and timber, banners fluttering from towers, the faint smell of coal smoke and tanned leather. Civilization, he supposed.

But the wary looks from the guards and the uncertain silence from his companions made it feel a lot more like another kind of cage.

The gate captain was already waiting by the time they passed beneath the portcullis. She stood in a polished breastplate and dark crimson cloak, the

mark of the Triumvirate embroidered in silver thread over her heart.

Her eyes swept over the group, pausing only briefly on each of the noblewomen — the recognition automatic, the deference practiced. But when her gaze landed on Al, her composure faltered. Just for a heartbeat.

A man.

The word whispered through the guard line like wind through tall grass. Helmets tilted, voices dropped to murmurs. A few of the younger soldiers stared outright before their captain's sharp bark scattered them back to their duties.

"Lady Arwen," the captain said crisply, addressing Catrin first. "Your arrival was not expected for another fortnight."

"Our mission concluded sooner than planned," Catrin replied evenly.

"I see." The captain's gaze flicked toward Al again, lingering longer this time. "And this…?"

"Our charge," Pryce cut in smoothly before Catrin could answer. "By decree of the crown and under the seal of the Triumvirate."

The captain blinked, uncertain whether that was a lie, a joke, or both. But whatever doubts she had, she swallowed them with a soldier's discipline. "As you say, my lady. The Commandant will wish to see you immediately."

She gestured to one of her subordinates — a broad-shouldered sergeant with the fresh-scrubbed look of someone barely out of cadet camp. "Take the mounts to the stables. See they're fed and watered. And send word to the Commandant that the daughters of Arwen, Pryce, and Vaughn have returned from Aelthar's Maw."

The sergeant saluted and hurried off, calling for stable hands.

As they dismounted, Al felt eyes still on him — curious, cautious, a few wide with something between fascination and disbelief. A few whispered to one another when they thought he couldn't hear.

Evan leaned closer to him as she handed off her reins. "You'll have to forgive them," she murmured. "For most of these girls, you're the first man they've ever seen up close."

Al gave her a look halfway between discomfort and dry humor. "Guess I should start charging admission."

Idris snorted a laugh that she tried — and failed — to stifle.

"Don't," Evan warned, smiling despite herself. "They'd *pay*."

The gate captain cleared her throat sharply. "This way, my ladies. The Commandant's hall awaits."

As they walked deeper into the fortress, Al noticed how the noise shifted — from the distant hammering of the outer yard to the muted clang of boots on stone. The further they went, the quieter the stares became, but the more he felt them.

He wasn’t sure whether he was being escorted to an office, a debriefing — or a holding cell.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

CHAPTER 24

The Commandant's office was built like a fortress inside a fortress—heavy beams, limestone walls, and a single narrow window that cut the late afternoon light into a sharp blade across the floor. The woman behind the desk looked carved from the same stone.

Her uniform was simpler than the nobles', but far more commanding: burnished cuirass, crimson cloak, silver braid denoting her as Matron-Commandant of the fort. The scars on her hands suggested she had earned the rank through blood and grit, not inheritance.

Catrin bowed. "Matron-Commandant Vale, we bring a report on the Aelthar's Maw."

Vale's eyes, sharp as a hawk's, swept across the noblewomen before settling on the unfamiliar presence among them. "I was told your mission failed."

"Rumor travels faster than riders," Pryce said smoothly. "The cultists are dead. The Maw is sealed. But we… found something."

She inclined her head subtly toward Al.

Vale studied him, expression unreadable. "Is it true?" she finally murmured. "A man—whole and breathing—walking under the sky?"

Her voice was soft but carried the weight of superstition and statecraft.

"Saints preserve us," she whispered.

All around them, aides and guards stilled, attention snapping toward Al as though expecting him to sprout horns.

"Step forward," Vale said.

Al obeyed, shoulders squared, posture instinctively military. Vale circled him like a veteran sizing up a new recruit—or a lion assessing a trespasser.

"You speak our tongue?" she asked at last.

"Mostly."

"And what are you?" Vale asked bluntly. "A strange word was used—mah-reen?"

"I am a Marine," he said. "A kind of soldier, ma'am."

The sound of the title tugged a faint grin from her, though her eyes remained sharp. “We’ll discuss the meaning later. For now, I must determine something far simpler: are you whole?”

Al frowned. “Whole?”

“Healthy,” Vale clarified. “Unaffected by the Maw’s corruption. The Maw has left survivors before—none remained themselves for long. I will not have that danger inside my command.”

Catrin stiffened, understanding.

Evan tried to help. “He has been examined for wounds, Matron—”

Vale silenced her with a raised hand. “Not what I meant.”

Her gaze pinned Al. “Are you functional?”

Al blinked. “Ma’am, I’m not sure what you’re—”

Rhyosyn cleared her throat delicately. “She means whether you can sire children.”

Al’s jaw tightened. “That’s quite a question to ask in mixed company.”

“There is no ‘mixed company’ in my command,” Vale said flatly. “Only reality. And reality says that you are a political crisis in boots.”

Silence dropped across the room.

After a long moment, Vale straightened, decision settling across her features. “You will dine with me this evening. My husband and sister-wives will be present.”

Pryce raised an eyebrow. “Your husband is here?”

Vale allowed the faintest smile. “Retired archivist. The fort’s cultural liaison. You will find him civilized. He will ensure our guest remains properly chaperoned—and the female ranks remain disciplined.”

Rhyosyn leaned toward Al and murmured, “You’ve been promoted from curiosity to state secret.”

Vale’s expression softened a fraction. “You’ve seen war, I think. You understand order. Keep to it, Marine, and I will ensure you remain unmolested and alive.”

Al gave a half-salute. “Yes, ma’am. That part sounds great.”

A short, dry chuckle escaped the Commandant. “Good. You’ll need your appetite. Dinner is at sunset. Do not keep my husband waiting—he hasn’t spoken to another man in fifteen years.”

The bells of the watchtower tolled the hour. Sunset was coming fast.

The chamber the guards led him to smelled faintly of lavender and linen. Rhyosyn and Pryce were already inside, overseeing attendants who laid out

folded garments—tunics, sashes, embroidered coats meant more for court than campaign.

Pryce turned sharply as he entered. “You cannot attend dinner like that.”

Al looked down. His dress uniform was clean, but road-worn—dust on the trousers, a frayed edge from the Maw fight. “What’s wrong with these? They’re clean.”

“They’re foreign,” Pryce said, as if that alone carried plague. “At the Commandant’s table, you will dress with respect.”

Rhyosyn muttered, “Respect… or camouflage?”

Pryce ignored her. “Strip him to shirt and breeches; nothing else will fit.”

“Hold on,” Al said, raising both hands. “I can dress myself.”

He closed his eyes, focusing on home—the familiar smell of detergent and gun oil, the weight of issued boots. Blue-gray fabric shimmered into existence piece by piece: boots first, then trousers, then his tan field shirt. Each manifestation tugged at his mana reserves; the air hummed faintly with System feedback.

Rhyosyn jumped. “Saints above—he’s conjuring again!”

“Not conjuring,” Al muttered. “Just getting dressed.”

A faint blue prompt flickered:

System Notice: Object materialization within allowable volume. Mana cost: 17%.

Pryce folded her arms. “And this attire signifies what?”

“Uniform,” Al said. “Means I belong to something bigger than myself.”

Catrin appeared in the doorway, studying him. “At least it fits,” she said. “The Commandant will appreciate that.”

Rhyosyn smirked. “Her sister-wives may appreciate it more.”

Al groaned. “Great. Love that.”

The dining hall was carved from pale stone, warmed by banners and crystal lamps. A polished oak table stretched the length of the room, set with gleaming silver, earthenware plates, and decanters of dark red wine. Eight places were prepared with meticulous care.

Military instinct made Al count them: seven occupied, one set apart at the end—plate, goblet, napkin untouched. The chair beside it remained empty.

Vale stood at the head of the table, armor removed but still every inch a soldier. Her husband sat midway down the right side—gray-haired, mild-eyed, ink-stained hands marking him as a lifelong scholar. Five women of varying ages flanked them—Vale’s sister-wives.

As Al approached, conversation dimmed to a hush.

“Ladies,” Vale announced, “our guest. The man from another world—the Marine.”

Her husband rose, bowing his head politely. “Welcome, son. It has been a very long time since I’ve spoken to another man.”

“Thank you, sir,” Al said, careful with his tone.

“Sit,” Vale ordered. “Eat. My household values courtesy—and we have many questions.”

Al took his seat. Vale hesitated before sitting, brushing her fingers along the back of the empty chair. Something soft and aching flickered across her expression.

Her husband followed her gaze. “Vale’s sister-wife, Mara. Lost to the border fever three winters ago. We keep her place.”

“It reminds us to be thankful,” one of the younger wives whispered.

Al nodded. “I understand that.”

Vale studied him. “Do you? Your world must have lost many to its wars.”

“Too many,” he said quietly.

Silence held a moment before serving women entered, setting steaming dishes on the table—roasted vegetables, game birds, fresh bread. Wine was poured.

Vale’s husband leaned forward, eyes bright. “My wife tells me your title—Marine—means you are soldier of the sea?”

“More or less,” Al said. “We fight from ships. Take beaches. Hold ground no one else wants.”

“A storm-born warrior,” one wife murmured. “How unusual. And your magic… it calls steel and fire from the air?”

“Sort of. Where I come from, it’s not magic. It’s craftsmanship, science, and faith in what works.”

The youngest wife frowned. “But how do you believe in something you cannot see?”

Al looked into his wine. “Do you believe in a god? Have you ever seen one? Science is measurable, testable. We build, and it works.”

Vale observed him. “You are unlike any man I have met, Marine. Most would be silent—or afraid—in such company.”

“I’ve had worse dinners under fire,” he said.

Laughter rippled softly down the table. Even Vale’s mouth twitched.

Yet tension lingered around the empty chair—a reminder of fragility: of peace, hierarchy, and whatever future Al represented.

Later, in the quiet of the Commandant's quarters, the fire burned low. The remnants of dinner sat untouched on a sideboard. Outside, the fort settled into the rhythm of the night watch.

Vale stood by the window, firelight glinting off her silver braid. Her husband, Aron, sat near the hearth, making notes in a ledger—an instinctive habit of a mind built for order.

For a long time, neither spoke.

Finally, Vale said, "You watched him closely."

"You asked me to," Aron replied without looking up.

"And?"

He closed the ledger gently. "He's not like the men of this world. He carries himself with discipline—but not obedience. And he looks people in the eye, Vale. Men here don't. They lower their gaze. He does not."

Vale frowned. "You think he's dangerous."

Aron smiled. "Everyone thinks he's dangerous. I think he's alive. There's a difference."

She crossed her arms. "Alive is not always a blessing. I've seen too many live long enough to cause ruin."

"Perhaps." Aron removed his spectacles. "But he didn't strike me as ruinous. Cautious, yes. Proud. Lost. Like a woman who's fought too long and forgotten what peace feels like."

Vale's expression flickered. "The garrison is unnerved. Half the sentries whisper his name like a charm; the other half like a curse."

"Of course they do," Aron said. "They've grown up believing men are relics—hidden, fragile, distant. Then he appears. Whole. Strong. Unbound."

Vale paced. "The Triumvirate will hear of this within days. I need to know whether I am protecting a threat… or presenting an opportunity."

Aron stood, facing her. "He still believes in duty. When you questioned his wholeness, he reacted with anger—not shame. That isn't a man who expects to be owned. That is a man who expects to serve."

Vale's jaw tightened, though something gentler moved behind her eyes. "You always see what others miss."

"Only because you let me," Aron said softly. "Don't treat this Marine like a weapon. Treat him like a storm. You cannot control a storm—but you can guide its wind."

Vale turned back to the window, watching moonlight wash over the ramparts. “Guide it,” she whispered. “Before it tears down the walls.”

Aron came to her side and took her hand. She squeezed once, then released.

“Send word to the Triumvirate tomorrow,” Vale said. “Tell them the man is alive. Under guard. And… compliant.”

“And if he isn’t?”

Vale’s eyes followed the moon’s arc. “Then we’ll see if the storm can be reasoned with.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

CHAPTER 25

The barracks had gone silent except for the faint rattle of the night wind against the shutters. Al sat on the cot, elbows on his knees, staring at the floorboards. He'd spent the evening surrounded by officers, nobility, and questions he couldn't begin to answer. Now, in the stillness, it all felt unreal.

What he needed was something solid. Something familiar.

Back home, they'd had *duty logs*. Every shift, every patrol, someone wrote down what happened — who came, who went, what changed. Not because it mattered now, but because someday someone might need to know. It was structure. It was order.

He focused on the memory of it: the olive-drab cover, the smell of oil and paper, the weight of responsibility behind every entry. He thought of it hard enough that the air shimmered — and there it was.

A small, green-bound logbook sat on his knee. Clean. Perfect. Unissued.

He smiled faintly. "Well, I'll be damned."

Two pens followed — one black, one red — clattering softly onto the blanket. The System's shimmer faded, leaving only the faint smell of ink.

To whomever finds this journal or myself in the future— Know that a man may lie to himself, but ink always remains. I find myself far from home, on an earth that is not mine. Surrounded by women—beautiful, strange, and armed to the teeth.

I woke in a place they call Aelthar's Maw—some kind of dungeon, if you believe the word. Crawling with creatures straight out of a fever dream: kobolds, goblins, something worse that I don't have a name for. I was half-dead, bound in chains that felt alive, and a group of women—soldiers, nobles, I still can't tell which—fought their way through to find me.

They call themselves Ladies Arwen, Pryce, and Vaughn—each from houses that sound more like empires than families. I think they hate each other more than they hate monsters. Two guards came with them, veterans by the look, steady hands. Without them, I'd be bones in that cave.

The “System” they speak of—their kind of magic—doesn’t seem to know what to make of me. I can summon things I know from home, but I don’t understand how. A pistol, MREs and even a damn grenade… they appear when I think of them, like the world itself is filling in the blanks. It’s eating through my energy—mana, they call it—but I’m learning. Slowly.

The locals don’t seem to have men around, not like back home. The ratio they mentioned—one man to fifteen, maybe twenty women. You can feel it in how they look at me. Some curious, some cautious. A few like they’re studying a weapon that might go off in their hands.

We made it out of the Maw alive and reached a fortress—a place called Vale’s Keep, named after the woman who commands it. She’s as sharp as any officer I’ve met and about as easy to impress as a Gunnery Sergeant on inspection day. She asked if I was “whole.” I understood later that she meant if I could still make children. That’s the kind of world this is.

I ate dinner with her, her husband, and her sister-wives. That is to say the women married to the man were all her sisters and his wives. Kind people, mostly. Educated. They talk about magic the way we talk about engines or ammo counts—something that keeps civilization running but no one really understands. When I told them about my world, about machines and science, they looked at me like I’d said I could make the sun stand still. Maybe I could, given time.

The System says I’ve killed enough monsters to earn experience, but I’m still a long way from my first “level.” Whatever that means. I keep wondering what it’ll say when I do. Whether it’ll call me soldier or something else.

For now, I’m alive. I’ve got food, a roof, and a pen that still writes in English, at least I think it does. That’s enough. Tomorrow we’ll see what the Triumvirate—their ruling council—wants to do with me. If they’re anything like command back home, it’ll involve paperwork, suspicion, and a whole lot of bullshit.

Still… I can’t shake the feeling that I didn’t end up here by accident. Someone—or something—dragged me across worlds for a reason.

End of Entry One.

Sunlight pushed its way through the shutter slats, painting lines across the foot of the cot. Al blinked awake to the faint hum in his head — the one he’d learned meant the System had something to say.

“Guess I don’t get coffee before bad news here either,” he muttered.

The words floated in front of his eyes in clean, white lettering that pulsed softly:

[System Notification] Bound Artifact Registered. *Item: Personal Journal (U.S. Origin) Status: Linked to User – Aleric Tanim Note: Only the registered user may alter or add entries. Warning: External communication unavailable while artifact is beyond the user's dimensional boundary.*

He rubbed at his eyes, still half-asleep. "So, it's mine. Great. And if it ends up back on Earth… nobody can write me back."

The screen blinked once in acknowledgment — then vanished.

"Figures," he said to no one in particular. "Even in another universe, the Corps finds a way to keep me writing reports nobody'll ever read."

He sat up, swinging his legs off the cot. The air was cooler than last night; the stone walls held the chill. For a long moment he just stared at the faint shimmer where the journal should be, then reached for it.

It appeared in his hands like it had been waiting for him all along. He opened it — the pages clean and crisp, the ink from last night unmoved. No new marks. No sign anyone had touched it.

Entry Two: *System tagged the logbook as "bound." Means no one else can write in it. No edits, no messages. Just me. So if this thing ever finds its way home… nobody's sending word back. I don't know if that's comforting or depressing. Maybe both.*

It's proof I still exist, at least. The System thinks I'm worth cataloguing. Hell, that's something.

He shut the book and leaned back, rubbing a hand over his face. Outside, he could hear the sound of boots on stone — morning drills, shouted cadence, the thud of practice blades. All female voices. Always female voices.

A knock came at the door. Evan's voice filtered through. "Marine? Commandant Vale requests your presence in the training yard. She says it's time you learned how we fight."

Al sighed, slipping the journal into the air where it vanished again with a soft hum. "Yeah," he said, standing. "Guess it's time they learned how *I* fight too."

***

Al went to the small wooden locker the attendants had brought and peeled off the travel tunic, folding it with the same care he'd learned in field racks. The servants fussed politely—soft hands, careful fingers—laying out a set of plain utility fatigues Vale had approved: muted gray-green trousers, a rolled shirt, worn leather boots. Nothing fancy. Nothing that announced him as a novelty.

He concentrated on the image of a kit he actually trusted: the cut of a Marine’s field shirt, the way the seams bunched under a plate carrier he didn’t have, the feel of a belt cinched just so. The System accepted the blueprint like an old sergeant granting leave. Fabric and thread shimmered into being in discrete pieces—boots first, each one appearing cold and heavy on his feet; trousers next, folding over hips with a snug, familiar fit; the shirt last, sleeves rolled, collar flat.

A soft prompt winked at the corner of his sight—nothing formal, just the System’s polite hum reminding him of the cost. He ignored it. Habit and habit’s comforts were worth a little mana debt.

He closed the journal cleanly on his palm, thumb rubbing the spine, then sent it away. The logbook vanished on the same faint pulse he’d been learning to trust—the little private exile that kept his words safe. For a moment the room felt emptier. Then he slid his hand inside the waistband and, with the simple muscle memory of a thousand drills, called up something smaller.

A KA-BAR blade folded into existence in his hand: heavy, unadorned, its edge gleaming as if it had seen the light that morning a hundred times. The leather sheath hung from nothing for a heartbeat, then snapped into place at his hip when he drew it through the belt loop he’d just summoned. He ran his thumb along the spine out of habit; it was dry and clean—no grit, no blood, no crusted oil. Not that it needed cleaning, he told himself. It had been made by the same conjuring that made the gun and grenade—perfect and immediate, the way a man’s tools are in the cleanest armory.

Rhyosyn glanced up from the cot where she’d been tying her own gauntlets and arched one eyebrow. “That… looks useful.”

Evan smirked. “Not a bad choice. Cuts and doesn’t ask questions.”

Idris, unflappable as ever, simply nodded. “Keep it close and your hands where I can see them.”

Al slid the blade home, feeling the familiar click of the retention strap. The weight at his hip was more comfort than threat; the knife had always

been a private thing, an insurance policy and a memory of men who'd taught him how to survive.

He tested the fit with a practiced hitch of his belt. "Ready when you are," he said, voice low.

Outside, the yard sounded like a beating heart—boots, commands, the cadence of a world that still expected to be defended. He swallowed, pulled on the fatigue jacket, and followed the others out, the KA-BAR's silent presence against his thigh reminding him that, whatever this place called magic, he still carried pieces of home with him.

When Al stepped out into the exercise yard, the world seemed to pause.

The air was thick with morning dust and sunlight, the sound of drills echoing off stone — until a ripple of silence spread through the formation like a wave hitting sand. One by one, voices faltered, blades lowered, and the clatter of wooden practice weapons faded. A hundred women turned in unison, their gazes locking on him.

For his part, Al didn't flinch. The stares of a hundred recruits had never bothered him before — though usually he was the one barking orders, not the one being watched like a ghost.

The soldiers were dressed for training: light tunics belted at the waist, loose pants for movement, sandals that looked comfortable but not at all suited for running drills on rough stone. He made a mental note of it — *poor traction, no ankle support.*

He leaned slightly toward Evan and Idris, his guards flanking him. "How do you want to handle this?"

Evan's lips quirked faintly. "Don't die," she said.

Idris added, "Don't stare back too long. They'll take it as a challenge."

Before he could answer, the crowd shifted. A line parted down the center, and the Commandant strode forward like the break in a storm front.

Vale wore no armor today — only a black officer's tunic and boots that somehow managed to look both elegant and lethal. Her expression was carved in command.

"Marine," she called as she approached, "I would like to see how your kind trains — and how you fight."

Her eyes flicked toward the raised dais beside the yard, where several of her officers and a handful of nobles had gathered. "Show my ladies."

Al nodded, the motion crisp and controlled. "Yes, ma'am. I can do that."

He glanced around the yard — open ground, packed dirt, a few lines marked for formation drills. It wasn't all that different from the grinder back home.

"Guess we'll start with the basics," he said under his breath. "Drill, calisthenics… maybe a warm-up run."

He turned back to Vale. "How safe is it outside the city walls?"

Vale arched a brow. "Safe enough for those who can handle themselves. Why?"

"Because, ma'am," Al said, stretching his shoulders, "where I'm from, every good training day starts with a few miles underfoot. And if your people are going to watch, they might as well learn how Marines wake up."

Vale's mouth curved — not quite a smile, but something that suggested she appreciated his nerve. "Very well. The outer road follows the east wall and circles back. Stay within sight of the watchtowers. Take a squad if you wish."

Al gave a short nod. "No need. If something out there wants to try me, I'll consider it part of the warm-up."

That earned him a few muffled gasps from the watching ranks — and one sharp laugh from Evan.

As he stepped out toward the gate, the yard came alive again in whispers and murmurs. Some of the younger soldiers followed to the edge of the training grounds, curiosity gleaming in their eyes.

"Is he serious?" one whispered. "Saints, he's mad," said another. "Or he's exactly what the Commandant thinks he is," murmured a third.

Al rolled his shoulders once more, feeling the stretch across his back and the solid weight of the KA-BAR at his side. The gate opened ahead, spilling sunlight and the scent of wild grass into the yard.

He grinned, the kind that never reached his eyes. "Time to PT, ladies."

And with that, he broke into a steady jog — the cadence of booted feet echoing against the walls of a world that had never seen a Marine before.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

CHAPTER 26

The eastern gate yawned open again just past midmorning, sunlight glinting off the iron hinges. A hush fell over the yard as Al jogged back through the archway, breathing steady, sweat plastering his shirt to his shoulders.

He'd taken the route Vale had mentioned — ten full laps around the city's perimeter road. Five miles, give or take. The walls loomed high beside him most of the way, pale limestone catching the light like bone. He'd passed startled sentries, farmers, and one bewildered patrol captain who'd tried to salute and stare at the same time.

Now, back inside, his stride didn't waver. He slowed to a walk only when he hit the training yard again.

The hundred women who'd watched him leave were still there — though their expressions had shifted from curiosity to disbelief. A few of the younger soldiers whispered to each other. Others stared openly at the sheen of sweat on his arms, the easy rise and fall of his chest, the complete lack of fatigue in his step.

Al ignored the stares and headed straight for the water trough. He dipped a metal cup, drank deep, then poured another over his head. The cold bite made him grin. "Damn," he muttered, "good water."

Rhyosyn was the first to break the silence. "You ran the entire perimeter?"

"Ten laps," Al said simply, setting the cup down. "Call it five miles."

Idris blinked. "Five miles… *running*?"

He shrugged. "That's the warm-up."

A few gasps rippled through the crowd. Even Commandant Vale, watching from the raised platform, seemed to reassess him in silence.

Al rolled his shoulders, stretching his neck, and turned back to the formation of soldiers. "Alright. Next is PT — physical training. Stretch out if you don't want to pull something."

He dropped easily into a set of forward bends, then squats, then lunges, the movements fluid and methodical. “You work the joints first, keep your breathing steady. Always stretch before you break a sweat — or you’ll regret it tomorrow.”

The women watched for a moment, then — to everyone’s surprise — one soldier stepped forward, mimicking the motion. Then another. Then a dozen more. Within minutes, half the yard was following his lead, the other half staring in confusion.

Al grinned. “Not bad. You’ll thank me later.”

He started the cadence drills next: push-ups, sit-ups, burpees, jumping jacks. No System enhancements, no mana — just muscle, will, and rhythm. His voice carried through the yard, steady and low, the old cadence rolling out of memory:

“One, two, three, four — Marine Corps!”

At first, only his voice echoed back. Then, hesitantly, a few of the women joined in. By the fifth round, the chant was a thunder that rolled across the walls.

Vale stood on the dais, arms crossed, her face unreadable. “He’s training them,” she murmured to her adjutant.

The adjutant swallowed. “Should I stop it, ma’am?”

Vale shook her head slowly. “No. Let them see what endurance looks like.”

By the time Al called the last set, half the garrison was gasping, and the other half was watching him like he’d rewritten the laws of effort. He straightened, wiped his forehead with his sleeve, and smiled faintly.

“Not bad,” he said. “You’ve got heart. That’s the hard part.”

Evan laughed from the sidelines. “Saints, Marine. You’ll kill them before the enemy gets the chance.”

“Only if they don’t hydrate,” Al said, grabbing another drink from the trough.

The Commandant descended from the platform, eyes sharp but not unkind. “I asked you to show us how Marines fight,” she said.

Al looked at the exhausted women, then back at her. “This is how we start, ma’am.”

The yard smelled of sweat, dust, and victory. The last of the cadence faded into the air, leaving only the rasp of breathing and the shuffle of boots.

Al straightened, resting his hands on his hips as the women formed loose ranks again. Their faces were flushed, but there was something new there — a flicker of respect, maybe even awe.

Commandant Vale stepped down from the dais, boots crunching softly on the packed dirt. “You have their attention now, Marine. You’ve shown us endurance. But I asked to see how you *fight.*”

Al nodded slowly, catching his breath. “Yes, ma’am. That’s the harder part.”

He drew the KA-BAR from his belt with an easy, practiced motion. The blade caught the sunlight as he turned it in his hand.

“Marines start simple,” he said, his voice carrying across the yard. “First thing you learn is that your body is your first weapon — hands, elbows, knees. Then comes this.” He held the knife up for all to see. “Basic hand-to-hand, close quarters. We call it the ‘last resort.’ If you’re this close, things have already gone wrong.”

He shifted into a ready stance, knees slightly bent, weight balanced. The movements were small, economical — all business, no flourish. “We don’t dance, we don’t fence. We finish fast and stay alive.”

He demonstrated a short combination — parry, thrust, twist, retreat — slow enough that the soldiers could see the efficiency of it. The motion drew murmurs; they were used to flowing arcs and ritualized drills, not the brutal simplicity of combat meant for survival.

Vale circled him slowly, eyes narrowed, analytical. “And after the knife?”

Al slid it back into its sheath. “After that, it’s the rifle.”

He summoned his sidearm — the SIG P228 appearing in his hand with a soft shimmer. A few of the women flinched, others leaned forward, fascinated.

“This pistol,” he said, holding it up, “isn’t for real fighting. It’s for defense. Last line, close range, emergencies.” He turned it sideways so they could see the smooth slide and the matte finish. “If I have to use this, it means my rifle’s gone or something went wrong. In the Corps, that’s what we call a bad day.”

Vale’s brow furrowed slightly. “You said you fight with guns, but this is not the gun you fight with?”

Al shook his head. “No, ma’am. The rifle’s the heart of it — your reach, your strength. The bayonet attaches to the end of it — steel on steel when

the bullets run out. That's how we train. But I don't have the rifle, and I don't have the field or the target range to show you what it can really do."

He paused, looking around at the women — soldiers who had been born into a world that knew magic instead of gunpowder. "Our weapons work at distance. Fire and thunder. But what makes a Marine dangerous isn't the weapon — it's the discipline. The training that doesn't stop, even when you're tired, even when you're scared."

Vale studied him a long moment. "You speak of war as though it were mathematics."

Al gave a small shrug. "Closer to physics, ma'am. Equal and opposite reactions. Only difference is, our mistakes bleed."

That earned him another murmur from the ranks — part admiration, part disbelief.

Vale's tone softened slightly. "Then show us, Marine. Show us the body, the knife, and what you call discipline. Let my officers see how you make soldiers from men."

He nodded once, expression steady. "Yes, ma'am."

He turned toward the yard again, loosening his shoulders. "Alright, ladies," he said, voice low but clear. "Let's start with something simple — how to keep your feet under you when the world hits back."

The Commandant's gaze swept across the yard, her expression settling into something like decision. "Talking is one thing, Marine," she said, her voice clear enough to carry. "But a soldier's worth isn't measured in words."

She turned toward the gathered ranks. "Champion," she called.

A tall woman stepped forward from the watching line — broad-shouldered, dark-skinned, her hair braided tight and wrapped in a scarlet cord. The crowd shifted with quiet recognition. Even Al caught the subtle change in posture from those nearby: respect, mixed with a little fear.

The woman dropped to one knee before Vale. "Matron-Commandant."

"Rise, Captain Jessa Rhyn," Vale said. "You'll test our guest."

Al felt every eye swing toward him. He could already see what Vale was doing — not malice, just command. *She's assessing risk,* he thought. *And sending the best to do it.*

Jessa rolled her shoulders as she stood. "As you will, Matron."

Al nodded to her, polite. "You the best you've got?"

Her grin was sharp. "Today, Marine, I'm the one they'll remember."

He chuckled once, low. “Fair enough.”

He stepped to the center of the yard, pulling off his fatigue jacket and tossing it aside. The air was warm against his skin, the ground packed hard beneath his boots. He rotated his wrists, working out the stiffness. “Rules?”

“First to yield,” Vale said simply. “No killing blows. No weapons.”

“Understood.”

He glanced at his knife and pistol, then unclipped them, setting them carefully on the ground. “Let’s keep it clean then.”

Jessa stepped into position, feet wide, hands up in a balanced stance that reminded him of a hybrid between fencing and grappling. Her focus was absolute.

Al’s stance, by contrast, was deceptively loose — knees bent, hands open, center of gravity low. A mix of Marine Corps Line Training, Krav Maga, and a little Muay Thai he’d picked up from a Corpsman in Okinawa. Efficient. Ugly. Effective.

Vale raised a hand. “Begin.”

Jessa moved first — fast, decisive, closing the distance in a blur of motion. Al sidestepped, deflecting her strike with a forearm block, redirecting her momentum past him. He didn’t counter, just observed — learning the rhythm.

She came again, a low sweep aimed to unbalance him. This time he pivoted, stepping through the attack, grabbed her wrist, and twisted — not hard enough to break it, but enough to drop her to a knee.

Gasps rippled through the ranks.

Jessa rolled out of it, coming up fluidly, her expression tightening. “You’ve fought before.”

“Once or twice,” he said, calm.

The next exchange was faster. She used her reach, testing his defenses with controlled precision. Al took the hits that didn’t matter, absorbed others, shifted angles. When she overextended, he stepped in, caught her balance, and executed a clean takedown. The impact kicked up dust.

She was on her back before she knew it, Al’s forearm across her chest — not pinning, but asserting dominance. His voice was even, professional. “Yield.”

Jessa stared up at him, chest heaving, then slapped the dirt once. “Yield.”

He stepped back immediately, offering a hand to help her up. She took it without hesitation, and the crowd erupted into murmurs — some

disbelieving, others impressed.

Vale descended from the dais again, her face unreadable. “You didn’t humiliate her,” she said. “You controlled, measured, and finished.”

“That’s the idea, ma’am,” Al replied. “Fight clean, end quick, walk away breathing.”

Vale studied him for a long moment. “You’ve been trained in many forms.”

“Yes, ma’am. The Corps borrows from everyone — Judo, Muay Thai, Krav Maga, Boxing, BJJ. You take what works and leave the rest. We don’t need style. We need survival.”

For the first time, a faint smile tugged at the corners of Vale’s mouth. “A soldier after my own heart.”

Then, to her troops: “Remember what you saw today. Power without discipline is nothing. This man’s control is what makes him dangerous.”

She looked back to Al. “You’ve proven your worth, Marine. Now the question becomes — to whom do you belong?”

The question hung in the air like a blade.

Al met her gaze steadily. “Ma’am, where I’m from, we belong to the mission.”

Vale inclined her head slowly. “Then we shall find you one.”

By sundown, the story had already changed three times. What had begun as a simple sparring match was retold like a bard’s ballad — every retelling louder, sharper, more impossible.

In the mess hall, the younger soldiers leaned close over their bowls of stew.

“I heard he threw the Captain through the air,” one whispered. “Just *picked her up* like a doll.”

“That’s not how it happened,” said another, rolling her eyes. “He turned her own strike against her. Smooth as glass. Like water bending steel.”

A third, eyes wide, added in a hushed tone, “They say he could’ve killed her if he’d wanted. Didn’t even breathe hard when it was over.”

The older sergeants at the next table said nothing for a long while, until one finally spoke around a mouthful of bread. “Don’t talk stupid. You saw him after. Man’s a fighter, sure, but he’s a professional. There’s a difference.”

Still, the whispers spread.

By the time the lanterns were lit, there were half a dozen versions of the duel — in one, Al moved faster than magic; in another, his strange "American strength" broke the ground beneath their feet. Someone even swore she'd seen the Commandant herself smile — a detail that, in the fort's rumor mill, meant the world was ending.

Outside the barracks, two guards kept watch along the wall.

"You think we could… talk to him?" the younger one asked quietly.

The elder snorted. "And what? Try to claim him? You saw the look the Commandant gave after the match. Touch that man without permission and you'll wish the goblins got you instead."

The younger laughed nervously. "You think she's going to keep him here?"

"She'd be a fool not to. And we'd be bigger fools to cross her."

They fell silent for a moment, listening to the steady rhythm of boots in the courtyard below — the late patrol changing watch.

Inside, at the officer's quarters, similar conversations were happening in lower tones.

"Vale will never release him," one lieutenant said. "You saw what he did today. That kind of man could change the balance between houses."

Another, older and wiser, shook her head. "Or break it. Best we don't tempt fate. The Triumvirate will have eyes here soon enough. No one steals from Commandant Vale. Not her soldiers. Not her man."

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

CHAPTER 27

The summons came at dawn.

Al entered the Commandant's office still rolling his shoulders from PT, the faint ache of yesterday's run lingering in his legs. The noblewomen were already there—Catrin, Pryce, and Rhyosyn—standing in a tense half-circle before Vale's desk.

The Commandant's face was unreadable, but there was an edge to her tone that hadn't been there the night before. "I received word from the capital at first light," she began, holding up a sealed dispatch stamped with the wax sigil of the Triumvirate. "Your group is to be transferred immediately."

Catrin frowned. "Transferred? To where?"

Vale's jaw tightened. "To the capital itself. The Triumvirate has taken an interest in your discovery. They wish to examine the… circumstances of your return from the Maw—and this man's arrival."

Al folded his arms. "Examine? You make it sound like I'm a damn artifact."

"From their point of view," Vale said evenly, "you are."

The room went still.

Rhyosyn's brow furrowed. "They'll want to test him."

Vale nodded once. "And question him. And, most likely, secure him."

Al's mouth went dry. "Secure me?"

"They have also recommended," she said carefully, "that you be fitted with a restraint device. For your protection, of course."

Al stared at her. "A device."

Vale inclined her head. "To prevent tampering."

"Tampering," he repeated, his tone flat.

"Yes," she said. "It… goes around your waist."

There was a beat of silence.

"Prevents what, exactly?" Al asked, already dreading the answer.

Vale’s voice didn’t waver, but her eyes flicked briefly toward the nobles—a soldier’s silent apology. “It ensures that no one can… interfere. Physically. With you.”

Understanding dawned. Al blinked once, then slowly raised an eyebrow. “You mean—”

Rhyosyn cleared her throat delicately. “Yes,” she said. “That.”

Al exhaled through his nose. “Ah.”

He looked from one woman to another, then back to the Commandant. “So, basically, you’re telling me I need a magical chastity belt.”

Pryce’s lips thinned. “That’s an indelicate term, but—yes.”

Vale let out a low sigh and leaned back in her chair, the steel of command softening for a fleeting instant. “Fortunately,” she said dryly, “I don’t have one.”

Catrin winced. Rhyosyn looked away, hiding a smile that wasn’t amusement.

Al let out a humorless laugh. “Lady, where I come from, we just call that a crime.”

Vale’s tone softened, just slightly. “Here, it’s an inevitability. I don’t like it any more than you do, Marine.”

The silence stretched until it started to hurt.

Finally, Al sighed. “You know, back home, this would be the part where my lawyer starts earning his paycheck.”

Rhyosyn tilted her head. “What’s a lawyer?”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Someone whose job it is to stop this kind of nonsense before it starts.”

Vale folded her hands atop the dispatch, the weight of command settling back into her posture. “We don’t have those here.”

Al met her eyes. “Yeah,” he said quietly. Then, after a beat, he added, “So when do we leave?”

Vale nodded once. “Within the hour.”

He turned to go, but she stopped him with one final warning.

“Marine.”

He looked back.

“You’ve already survived one impossible place,” she said. “Try not to make the next one worse.”

***

Vale’s words followed him out of the office like a shadow.

Try not to make the next one worse.

It sounded almost like advice. Maybe even compassion. But underneath it, Al could hear the weight of something else — resignation. The kind that came from someone who’d already accepted how ugly the world could get.

He paused in the corridor outside, letting the door close behind him. The light through the slit windows painted pale bars across the stone floor. He stared at them longer than he meant to.

A cage didn’t always have to be made of iron. Sometimes it was expectation. Sometimes it was fear.

He’d seen it in warzones before — not the same, but close. Power twisted people. Give someone authority and desperation, and they’d find ways to make both into weapons. But hearing it spoken so *casually* — as if locking him up to keep him from being violated was standard procedure — that cut deeper than he expected.

He rubbed a hand over his jaw, the stubble catching his fingertips. “Jesus,” he murmured.

In his world, men didn’t have to think like that. Didn’t have to watch their backs that way. He thought of boot camp, of long deployments, of jokes made in bad taste but never serious — not really. Here, though? That threat wasn’t theoretical.

Every look, every glance since he’d arrived suddenly took on a different shade. The lingering stares from the garrison. The giggles from the younger soldiers. Even the nobles’ sharp curiosity. It wasn’t admiration. It was *possession waiting for permission.*

He’d thought they were just adjusting to seeing a man in uniform. He hadn’t realized he was the equivalent of a loaded gun left on a table — dangerous, valuable, and too tempting to leave unattended.

He took a slow breath, forcing it out through his nose. He wasn’t angry — not yet. Anger required energy. Right now, he just felt cold.

If this was how men lived here… hiding behind “protection,” treated like property or breeding stock… then this world was a hell he couldn’t even imagine surviving in long-term.

He’d been trained to endure captivity, to resist coercion. But what did that training even mean in a place where the enemy wore silk and armor at the same time — and thought it was mercy to put a lock around a man’s waist?

He found a wall, leaned against it, and closed his eyes.

“Adapt and overcome,” he muttered, echoing the old Marine mantra. “Even here.”

But it rang hollow.

For the first time since arriving, Aleric Tanim understood that the war he was fighting now wasn’t against monsters or cultists. It was against a civilization that saw men not as people — but as *possessions that could run away.*

He opened his eyes again and straightened.

The path ahead hadn’t changed. The orders still stood. But something inside him had settled, gone quiet, like a hammer finding the head of a nail.

He wasn’t just going to survive this world. He was going to *change* it.

He walked the corridor in silence, the sound of his boots soft against the stone. The fortress was just waking — soldiers changing shifts, the smell of breakfast fires drifting faintly through the hall. Everything ordinary. Everything calm.

He envied them that calm.

When he reached his quarters, he shut the door behind him and leaned his forehead against the wood for a moment, eyes closed. The tension finally started to bleed out through his hands — not in anger, but in exhaustion. He wasn’t even sure what he was tired of anymore: the travel, the politics, the constant guessing at how this world worked, or the realization that even survival here had a price.

He straightened, crossed to the narrow table by the window, and summoned the journal. It appeared in his hand with that faint, electric hum — familiar now, almost comforting.

He opened to a blank page. The ink bled just a little, like it always did when he wrote too hard.

Entry Five

I used to think the worst thing a man could lose was freedom. Turns out there’s worse — losing the right to *choose.*

They talk about “protecting” me. About keeping me safe. They say it like it’s mercy, but all I hear is fear.

A world where men are hidden away, “preserved,” and guarded from their own biology. And I thought boot camp was dehumanizing.

I don’t know what kind of gods built a system like this, but they must’ve been terrified of what happens when people stand on even ground.

Vale means well — I think. She’s a soldier, not a monster. But she said it plain: here, control is survival. That’s not protection. That’s captivity with manners.

If this world runs on that kind of logic, then it’s broken. And maybe… maybe that’s why I’m here.

He set the pen down and read the words twice. They weren’t poetry. Just truth.

He tapped the page once with his thumb — a silent punctuation mark — then closed the book and whispered, “Send.”

The journal vanished with a faint shimmer, leaving the table bare.

For a long moment he just sat there, staring at the empty space where it had been. The room was still, the air thick with the scent of oil and linen.

Finally, he leaned back in the chair, looking up at the ceiling. “Guess that’s one thing they can’t take from me,” he muttered.

Outside, the fortress bell rang once, calling the morning to order.

Al exhaled, slow and steady. Then he rose, checked his gear by reflex, and reached for his pack. The capital was waiting — and he was done being anyone’s artifact.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

CHAPTER 28

The first day passed in dust and silence.

They rode out from Fort Vale under a pale morning sun, the fortress walls shrinking behind them until they were little more than a gray scar against the horizon. The escort rode in double column — twenty Crown soldiers, all women, all armed, all doing a very poor job of pretending they weren't staring at him.

Al ignored it at first. He'd been ogled before — in bars, in boot camp, even once by a curious village crowd in Helmand Province — but this was different. The looks weren't flirtatious or even suspicious. They were reverent. Hungry. *Anthropological.*

By midday, the weight of it had started to grate.

He shifted in his saddle and muttered to the guards riding nearest him, Evan and Idris. "You ever get tired of people watching you like you're about to break?"

Evan smirked faintly. "No one's watching us, Marine. They're watching *you*."

"I noticed."

"They can't help it," Idris added, eyes forward. "Some of these girls have never seen a man outside a portrait or a temple fresco. You're… unexpected."

Al exhaled through his nose. "Yeah, I get that a lot."

Behind them, one of the younger riders whispered something to her friend and stifled a nervous giggle. Rhyosyn shot them both a glare sharp enough to draw blood. The laughter died instantly.

By the second day, the novelty had worn down into tension. The soldiers rode with stricter discipline now — eyes ahead, reins tight, though Al could still feel their curiosity tugging at him like static.

The road wound south through low, rolling hills. Farms gave way to scrub, then to stretches of stone and thornbush. The terrain reminded him vaguely of the Carolinas in late summer — the same cicada buzz, the same

heat shimmering off the earth. But the air was different. Thicker. Charged, as though the System itself were watching.

They stopped only to water the horses and rest briefly at a watch post. Each time, the same thing happened: guards drifted closer, pretending to check tack or supplies, sneaking glances at him from under helms and braids.

At one stop, a soldier dropped her canteen when he turned toward her. The clang startled her horse. She went red as the Commandant's cloak.

Al raised his hands, half-grinning. "Easy there. I'm not contagious."

No one laughed, though Idris' lips twitched before she remembered herself.

When they finally made camp that second night, Vale ordered the tents arranged tight in a circle, guards posted at every corner. The nobles took their supper together, speaking in low tones. Al could hear snatches of it when the wind shifted — words like *Triumvirate*, *heritage*, and *breeding rights.* Each one felt like a bullet grazing too close.

He sat by the outer fire with the guards, rolling a pebble between his fingers. They talked softly among themselves, trying not to stare, until Evan finally broke the quiet.

"You don't like the attention," she said.

He shrugged. "Can't blame them. I'm a walking myth here. But back home, I was just another grunt trying to make it through deployment."

Idris gave him a sidelong glance. "And here?"

"Here," Al said, tossing the pebble into the fire, "I'm starting to feel like the deployment."

The guards exchanged looks, half amused, half sympathetic.

Above them, the stars burned in constellations he didn't recognize. Somewhere beyond the hills, the capital waited — the seat of the Triumvirate, the center of the world that wanted to own him.

When the fires burned low, Al stretched out on his bedroll, staring up at the alien sky. He was tired but not sleepy. His hand brushed the faint outline of his journal under the blanket, still safely bound to him, his one link to control.

Two days to the capital, he thought. *Two days to whatever comes next.*

And for the first time since arriving in this world, he found himself wondering if maybe the monsters underground had been the simpler problem after all.

By late afternoon of the second day, the capital rose from the plains like a dream made of marble and iron.

High walls ringed the city — tiered, gleaming pale gold where the sun struck them, dark as bone in the shadowed crevices. Towers reached toward the sky, their banners catching the wind in bursts of scarlet and white. At their bases, markets and mansions sprawled in careful chaos, stitched together by canals and paved avenues.

It was a city that had seen centuries, maybe millennia — the kind that didn't need to impress outsiders. It simply existed, aware of its own gravity.

Al rode between the flanking soldiers, eyes scanning the skyline. "You weren't kidding when you said *capital*," he murmured. "Looks like Rome got ideas and started over."

No one answered him.

The closer they got to the gates, the quieter the escort became. Even the horses seemed to feel the shift. The chatter faded, replaced by the rhythmic thud of hooves on stone.

At the outer checkpoint, the gate captain saluted and stepped forward. "Orders for transfer, Matron-Commandant Vale?"

Vale handed over the wax-sealed packet without a word. The captain broke the seal, eyes flicking across the script. Her brows rose once before she turned toward the city.

"Open the south gate!" she called.

Massive gears turned; the doors groaned open, revealing the broad avenue beyond — polished stone wide enough for six wagons abreast, lined with statues of women in armor, every one crowned with a laurel.

But the procession that waited just beyond the threshold wasn't military.

A black carriage stood at the center of the road, lacquered to a mirror sheen, drawn by four pale horses. Its silver trim gleamed, and a crest — a sun entwined with three crowns — was painted on its door. The symbol of the *Triumvirate.*

A small escort of cloaked riders flanked it, their armor darker than the garrison's, the metal inlaid with faintly pulsing sigils. They didn't speak or salute, but their presence carried weight — and warning.

Vale's jaw tightened. "So they've sent the Wardens," she murmured. "They must be eager."

Pryce frowned. "For what? A report?"

Vale didn't answer.

The lead Warden dismounted with precise grace and approached. Her voice was calm, but not warm. “Matron-Commandant Vale. You’ve done well. The Triumvirate requests that your party accompany us to the inner city.”

Vale’s hand twitched toward her sword before she caught herself. “You intend to take custody of my charges here?”

“The Triumvirate prefers discretion,” the Warden said. Her eyes flicked to Al. “The man especially.”

Al met her gaze, steady and unimpressed. “You can say *me,* lady. I’m not contagious.”

She blinked once, clearly unused to being spoken to that way. “You will ride in the covered carriage,” she said. “For your safety, of course.”

He smirked faintly. “Yeah, I’ve heard that line before.”

Rhyosyn leaned in, whispering under her breath, “You should go quietly. There are eyes everywhere.”

Al glanced at her, then at the nobles, who seemed caught between pride and unease. “And them?”

“They will accompany you,” the Warden said. “Their testimony is required as well.”

He looked from Vale to Catrin to Pryce. “So they’re my guards, or my jailers?”

Vale’s answer was clipped. “That depends on what you do next, Marine.”

The Warden gestured to the carriage. “Please.”

Al exhaled and muttered, “Yeah. Please.” He walked toward the carriage, his boots echoing on the stone. The door opened, revealing a velvet-lined interior — too fine for soldiers, too confined for comfort.

He ducked in and took the seat nearest the window. The nobles followed — Catrin first, expression tight, then Pryce, then Rhyosyn, whose eyes never stopped scanning the street outside.

The door closed with a solid *click.*

The carriage lurched forward, the sound of hooves and steel fading behind them.

Al watched through the curtained slit as the city passed — rows of merchants and masons pausing mid-task, staring after the procession, whispering. A few even made the sign of protection, as though they were watching a monster pass.

Inside the carriage, the air grew close.

Catrin finally broke the silence. “Whatever happens next, Marine… keep your temper. The Triumvirate’s gaze is not a thing one survives by defiance.”

Al gave a low laugh. “Yeah, well. Defiance is sort of my job description.”

Rhyosyn frowned. “Not here, it isn’t.”

The carriage rolled on, deeper into the capital, toward the spires where judgment waited — and whatever “device” the Triumvirate thought it could bind him with next.

The inner gates of the capital were built not for defense but for spectacle.

They rose higher than any fortress wall Al had seen—massive archways carved from pale stone that shimmered faintly under the sun. The streets narrowed as they climbed, winding through districts that grew cleaner, quieter, and emptier.

The clatter of hooves on cobble echoed off high façades of glass and marble. The commoners had vanished; only guards and servants moved here, every one of them female, every one stepping aside as the black carriage passed.

Rhyosyn leaned toward the window, watching the tiers rise around them. “The Citadel,” she murmured. “Heart of the Triumvirate.”

Al followed her gaze. The structure ahead dominated the skyline — a crown of spires surrounding a central tower, bridges connecting them like veins. It was half cathedral, half fortress, half palace — a place that had forgotten it wasn’t supposed to be all three.

He whistled low. “You folks don’t do subtle.”

No one laughed.

The carriage rolled through a series of gates — each guarded, each marked by increasingly ornate sigils. At the final arch, cloaked Wardens stopped them, and a brief exchange of symbols and documents followed. The air grew heavier, charged with the faint ozone scent of magic.

When the door finally opened, Al blinked in the light.

“Out,” said the escort captain. “You will be received.”

He climbed down, boots landing on the smooth stone of a courtyard too immaculate to belong to soldiers. Catrin, Pryce, and Rhyosyn followed, their expressions carefully neutral.

But the reception they’d been promised wasn’t there.

No delegation, no Triumvirate officials — just a small detachment of guards waiting beside the inner gate, flanking a side corridor that led *away*

from the tower’s grand entrance.

Vale, who had dismounted behind them, scowled. “Where are the envoys?”

The escort captain didn’t blink. “There has been a change in the schedule. The man will be processed and secured until further instructions are received.”

Al’s brows knit. “Processed?”

Pryce stiffened. “This is not what was agreed—”

The captain’s voice carried the flat certainty of rank. “It is what was *ordered.*”

Two guards stepped forward — not hostile, but with the calm inevitability of professionals who did this sort of thing for a living.

Rhyosyn took an involuntary step closer to Al. “They mean to separate him.”

Vale’s hand brushed her sword, then stopped short. She knew what defiance here would mean. “Stand down,” she murmured. “The Triumvirate doesn’t make suggestions.”

Al gave her a sidelong look. “You sound like you’ve been here before.”

Her jaw flexed. “Once.”

The guards gestured toward the corridor. “This way, Marine.”

Al hesitated. He didn’t like how they said his title — like it was a new species of animal they hadn’t decided whether to feed or dissect.

“Where exactly are we going?”

“The men’s wing,” one replied. “Accommodations have been prepared.”

“Accommodations,” he repeated dryly. “Do I get a mint on the pillow too?”

The guard didn’t answer.

They led him through a maze of corridors that smelled faintly of incense and steel. He counted turns, corners, stairwells—old habit. There were no windows. Every doorway they passed was reinforced with inlaid runes, glowing faintly in the low light.

When they finally stopped, it was before a set of double doors of carved oak, bound in brass and covered in sigils he didn’t recognize.

The guard pressed a crystal against the lock. The doors swung open.

Inside, the chamber was… beautiful.

Polished stone floors, rich carpets, bookshelves, and a four-poster bed with silk sheets. The walls were painted with scenes of forests and rivers. A

pitcher of wine sat on a table beside a bowl of fruit. Everything screamed comfort, refinement, safety.

And yet—

The windows were narrow slits. The door hinges had no visible lock, but he could feel the pulse of enchantment running through the frame. The air hummed faintly when he crossed the threshold.

He was inside a cage — a *gilded* one, but a cage nonetheless.

The guards stopped at the door. “Meals will be brought. You may summon a servant by ringing the bell.”

Al turned, eyes narrowing. “What happens if I don’t stay put?”

One of the guards smiled — not cruelly, but with weary certainty. “Then we find out what happens when the runes activate.”

The doors shut softly. The hum deepened for half a breath, then steadied.

He stood alone.

The room was too quiet.

Al dropped onto the edge of the bed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Well,” he muttered, “guess this is what protective custody looks like in Wonderland.”

He reached for his journal, summoned it with a thought, and flipped to a blank page.

Entry Six: *Two days’ ride to reach the capital. No ambushes, no monsters — just a city full of eyes that don’t blink. They call this safety. Feels a lot like a holding cell with nicer furniture. I’ve got walls, wine, and a bed that’s too soft to trust. Guess we’ll see who knocks first — a politician, a priest, or a jailer.*

He capped the pen and leaned back, staring at the ceiling until the ink dried.

From somewhere deep in the citadel came the faint sound of bells — high, resonant, ceremonial. And beneath that, too low for anyone else to hear, Al thought he caught a second sound: A hum, soft and pulsing, like the System itself was waiting.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

CHAPTER 29

Interlude – The Mothers' Counsel

House Arwen

(Catrin's Line — The Tacticians)

The council chamber of House Arwen smelled faintly of parchment and iron. Maps lined the walls, and the long table in the center was littered with markers representing territories and trade routes.

Lady Maera Arwen — Catrin's eldest mother and the ruling matron — sat at the head, hands folded neatly before her. Her armor was ceremonial, etched with the family sigil of a silver hawk, and her eyes were cold with thought. Around her sat her "daughters": sisters, nieces, and wives, each trained to fight or command.

Catrin knelt before them, freshly returned from the courier's office, her head bowed but her mind racing.

"So," Maera said at last. "It's true. A man—*a fertile one*—discovered alive, outside royal custody."

Catrin nodded once. "Commandant Vale confirmed it. The Triumvirate has summoned him to the capital."

A ripple of murmurs passed through the room.

Maera's second-in-command, a lean woman named Deryn, frowned. "Then he's as good as gone. They'll never let a free male remain unbound."

Maera raised a hand. "Not if we claim him first."

Catrin blinked. "Claim—Mother, the Triumvirate would—"

"—do what they always do," Maera interrupted smoothly. "Debate. Delay. Justify their own control. The Houses have blood rights older than their decrees. If you can gain his trust, daughter, if you can bring him under *our protection*, then House Arwen can offer what the crown cannot: freedom in name, loyalty in truth."

Catrin hesitated. "You're asking me to manipulate him."

"I'm asking you to *save him from them*," Maera said, eyes sharp as glass. "And in doing so, save us all. A man like that could sire a generation of

warriors — disciplined, tactical, bound by honor. We cannot let that bloodline fall into the hands of the Pryce bankers or Vaughn's magi."

Catrin bowed her head, though her stomach twisted. "Yes, Mother."

House Pryce

(Elowen's Line — The Financiers and Courtiers)

The Pryce estate was less a fortress and more a temple to luxury. Silk draperies framed tall windows, and the scent of sweet wine lingered in the air.

Lady Isolde Pryce reclined on a cushioned chair, her gold jewelry clinking softly as she turned over the sealed letter from the capital. "So the rumors are true," she purred. "A man — foreign, unclaimed, *breeding viable*. And my daughter was there when they found him."

Her sister-wife, Lyra, smiled faintly. "Fortune does love us."

Elowen stood rigid before them, her travel leathers dusted and torn, her jaw clenched. "It's not fortune. It's politics waiting to happen."

"Oh, darling," Isolde said, sipping from her cup. "Everything worth having *is* politics." She set the glass down, rising to her feet. "You will secure him for House Pryce. Offer him comfort, refinement, and purpose. Men like that — soldiers — they're simple creatures. Feed them, flatter them, and make them feel safe. He'll learn to love his cage if it's gilded well enough."

Elowen stiffened. "And if he resists?"

Lyra's smile turned thin. "Then we let the Triumvirate take him first. Nothing softens a man like fear. When they tire of him, he'll come to us willingly."

Elowen's throat tightened. "You speak of him like property."

Isolde's gaze hardened. "And what else would he be? Do not forget, daughter — freedom is a story told by those who already own everything they want."

Elowen's hands curled into fists. She bowed, because disobedience in House Pryce was not an option.

House Vaughn

(Rhyosyn's Line — The Magisters and Blooded Mages)

The Vaughn stronghold was older than both Arwen and Pryce — a half-ruined citadel that smelled of incense, wax, and storm. Lightning danced outside the high windows as the eldest matron, Archmage Seret Vaughn, studied a crystal orb that shimmered with visions of the capital's walls.

“The pattern is unmistakable,” she murmured. “The system itself marks him. He carries resonance.”

Rhyosyn stood near the base of the dais, cloak damp from travel. “He’s not a mage. He calls it *science*.”

Seret smiled faintly. “Ah, the old arrogance of dead men. They always believe what they cannot explain is simply undiscovered truth.”

The other Vaughn mothers — four of them, each wearing robes heavy with runes — murmured in interest.

“If his ‘science’ interacts with the system,” one said, “we could study it. Harness it.”

“Control it,” said another.

Seret nodded. “Precisely. Imagine what it would mean if he truly can summon weapons across worlds. A living conduit between planes. His magic might be the key to stabilizing our collapsing ley lines.”

Rhyosyn’s jaw tightened. “He’s not a key. He’s a man.”

Seret looked down at her with patient disdain. “Then treat him as one. Charm him. Learn from him. And when the Triumvirate tires of their pet, House Vaughn will be ready to offer him purpose — and power.”

Rhyosyn hesitated, then said softly, “You don’t understand him. He’s not… tame.”

“Then make him *believe* he is,” Seret replied. “Until it’s too late for him not to be.”

Each House moved in silence after their meetings, couriers leaving before dawn.

And somewhere far from their halls, the man they plotted over sat alone in his gilded cage — unaware that three entire bloodlines were already preparing to claim him, body and soul.

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The Citadel’s guest quarters — his *quarters* — were exactly what Vale had warned they’d be: a room meant to impress, not to free.

Al had been in holding cells before — military detainment, checkpoints, temporary billets behind wire — but this one was different. There was no cold steel, no concrete. Instead, there were murals of pastoral hills, a heavy bed with embroidered sheets, and a writing desk polished until it gleamed. The air smelled faintly of lavender and ink.

It would’ve been easy to forget you were locked in — if not for the bar.

It ran across the *inside* of the door, solid iron dressed up as art, engraved with the same looping sigils he’d started to hate. It was less about keeping him from getting out, he suspected, and more about keeping magic or people from getting *in.* He nominally had control of that bar.

There were guards too — always two of them, posted just beyond the threshold. He could hear them when the wind shifted through the ventilation slats: armor creaking, the quiet rhythm of bored breathing, an occasional cough.

He prowled anyway.

Every Marine learned to case a room — exits, blind corners, weak points. It was muscle memory. The first circuit told him what they wanted him to see. The second told him what they didn’t.

He found no obvious hidden doors, no loose panels, but near the back of the chamber a curtain of velvet hung heavier than it should have. When he pulled it aside, he found a narrow archway leading into a smaller adjoining room. The light inside was dim, filtered through a single slit window.

A library.

Not a grand one — more of a study tucked away for private reading — but the shelves were full, old and dusty. The spines were hand-tooled, the lettering gold and faded, the parchment edged with use.

He exhaled slowly and stepped in.

There were law books, journals, genealogies, and — oddly — a child’s primer with a hand-painted cover. He ran his fingers over the titles, sounding them out.

“**Judiciary Practices of the Crown Courts**,” he read softly. “**Civic Orders of Custodianship**… **Writs of Blood and Protection**.” He paused, pulling that one free.

The book was dense — pages of codified law written in the flowing calligraphy this world seemed to love. But the message came through clear enough, even to an outsider: bloodlines mattered more than lives. Inheritance, property, and birthright all circled around the same word — *lineage.*

Men were referenced only as “warded assets” or “heritage guarantors.” The legal phrasing was polite, clinical — but it made his skin crawl.

He put the book back and kept browsing.

The next was lighter, thinner — a local history written for students. It spoke of the *Severing*, an age-old event where men's souls had been "thinned" by divine punishment. Some stories framed it as a curse; others, as balance restored. None of them questioned it.

Further down the shelf, he found a slim volume of fairy tales bound in blue leather. The first story began:

Once, there were too many men, and the gods grew jealous of their pride. They sent storms to wash them away, and from the wreckage rose the Age of Daughters.

He shut the book. Hard.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Real healthy bedtime stories you tell the kids here."

Still, he took the book to the window and sat on the sill, reading as the light faded. The stories were cruel in the way that ancient ones often were — moral lessons dressed as myth. Men who defied their place turned into beasts, or shadows, or statues guarding the gates of powerful women. Every fable reinforced the same pattern: order was matriarchal, divine, eternal.

By the time the torches outside flared to life, he had three books stacked beside him: one of law, one of legend, and one of what passed for moral education.

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

He flipped open his own journal, summoned with a thought, and jotted a few lines under a new heading.

Entry Six: *Observation — Society: Hierarchical. Women rule through heritage and faith. Law built to protect bloodlines, not justice. Men exist as lineage, not individuals. Their myths back it up — divine correction, gods favoring the daughters. No rebellion in the stories. No resistance. Just resignation dressed as virtue. They call it order. I call it fear that got old enough to grow roots.*

He stared at the last line for a moment, then closed the book and sent it away.

The air in the library felt thicker now — heavy with dust and memory. He leaned back against the shelves, rubbing at his temple.

They built an entire civilization around a wound, he thought. *And they call it peace. I feel like an orphan in this place…*

The guards shifted outside. The sigils on the door pulsed once, faintly, as though the room itself were listening. Al read the words he wrote and saw

one word an important word.

Al didn’t look up.

He’d already found what he needed: the truth, written in their own ink. He began flipping through the book of law and inheritance rights. There he began to smile.

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Interlude II – The Petitions

The Hall of Judicars – Capital of Atherai

The Hall of Judicars was not built for justice so much as for hierarchy. White marble stairs climbed toward a dais carved with the sigil of the Triumvirate — three interlocking suns. The benches below were filled with advocates, clerks, and emissaries, each cloaked in the colors of their House. Incense burned in copper bowls, thick enough to blur the edges of the room.

The discovery of a fertile foreign man had already reached every corridor of power. Within a day, three petitions had been filed. By dawn, they were to be heard.

House Arwen – Petition of Custody Through Military Precedent

Catrin’s eldest mother, **Maera Arwen**, stood before the bench with the discipline of a commander addressing her troops.

“By military doctrine,” she declared, “the man known as Aleric Tanim was recovered in the field by an Arwen officer. He was secured, protected, and transported under House Arwen command authority. By long-standing code, spoils and discoveries of the field fall under the custodianship of the House that claims them.”

The presiding Judicar — an older woman in crimson robes — peered down from the dais. “Are you calling him a spoil of war, Lady Arwen?”

Maera did not blink. “I am calling him a *soldier*. One who deserves command that understands the discipline of arms. Arwen will give him that. No harm. No exploitation. Just order.”

From the benches, whispers stirred. One of the clerks murmured, “Order, or ownership?”

Maera’s gaze silenced them.

Her argument was filed in the record — concise, lawful, and cold.

House Pryce – Petition of Stewardship by Economic Guarantee

The next advocate stepped forward: **Isolde Pryce**, resplendent in gold-threaded robes, her smile a perfect mask of civility.

“Honored Judicars,” she began smoothly, “the matter of custody need not rest upon archaic military law. House Pryce offers a pragmatic solution. We will finance his protection, education, and welfare. We will see him provided for — as one of our own clients.”

A pause.

“In exchange,” she added delicately, “the House shall retain reproductive stewardship and the rights of commercial patent for any technologies or magics derived from his so-called ‘American arts.’”

The chamber erupted in murmurs — scandalized, impressed, intrigued.

One of the younger Judicars frowned. “You would monetize a living being’s… essence?”

Isolde’s smile didn’t falter. “We would *document* it. Civilization thrives on contracts, not sentiment.”

House Vaughn – Petition of Custody for Research and Preservation

Finally, **Archmage Seret Vaughn** approached, her robes whispering like a storm. She bowed only slightly before the dais, the faint crackle of static in her wake.

“This man’s arrival is not a political event — it is a metaphysical one,” she said. “His magic defies system parameters. His presence registers as foreign code. If we allow him to vanish into noble squabbling, we risk disrupting the balance of the ley. House Vaughn offers containment, study, and — if the Triumvirate decrees — eventual release under oath.”

The Judicar’s tone was wary. “Containment. You mean imprisonment.”

Seret smiled thinly. “*Observation*, honored one. Science requires discipline.”

By the time the petitions were sealed into the record, the air in the Hall was heavy with perfume and venom. Each House bowed to protocol, but the truth was plain: legality was just the first shot in a larger war.

As the assembly dispersed, whispers raced like wildfire through the marble corridors.

“Three Houses invoking ancient law on the same day…” “They’ll tear each other apart before the Triumvirate even rules.” “And the man?” “The man won’t have a say. He never does.”

In the upper galleries, hidden behind a lattice of carved stone, an unseen observer — one of the Triumvirate’s aides — took down every word in a

silver-bound ledger.

By nightfall, those records would be on a matriarch’s desk, and the decision would no longer belong to the Houses at all.

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Chapter Thirty

CHAPTER 30

Petition to the High Judiciary of the Triumvirate Realms

Filed under the provisions of the Law of Hearth and Holding (The Widow's Charter)

To whom it may concern in the service of Law and Crown,

I, Aleric Tanim, son of no registered House, of sound mind and lawful age, hereby submit this petition for consideration before the High Judiciary under the provisions of the Law of Hearth and Holding, also known as The Widow's Charter.

By my own testimony and by the witness of the officers of the Crown who brought me from the Aelthar's Maw, I am without living kin, sponsor, or sworn family within this realm. As such, I am—by definition under Article I: The Right of Custodial Hearth—an orphan of standing sufficient to invoke the rights and protections therein described.

Statement of Claim

Custodial Hearth and Independent Residence: I request to be recognized as the holder of a Custodial Hearth under the Charter, granting me lawful residence and self-governance within the realm, free from house allegiance or indenture.

Representation and Counsel: Under the implicit protection of Article IV: The Guardian's Reservation, I request the appointment of a legal representative well-versed in the codes and customs of the Crown to act as my counsel and interpreter of law until such time as I demonstrate sufficient understanding to act on my own behalf. It is my understanding that such counsel—commonly assigned to widows and foreign settlers—exists to ensure that ignorance of the law is not treated as defiance of it.

Declaration of Allegiance: In accordance with Article II: The Limitation of Allegiance, I hereby swear provisional fealty to the Triumvirate Crown and to no noble house, clan, or religious body. I acknowledge that my rights derive solely from the Crown's law, not from the privilege of bloodline or matrimony.

Recognition of Lawful Status and Rights of Continuance: I request acknowledgment that, should I in the future establish a lawful family, oath, or progeny within this realm, such heirs may inherit the privileges afforded under Article III: The Clause of Issue and Continuance, subject to the Crown’s oversight.

Basis of Petition

While custom favors women as holders of the Hearth and Charter, the text of the law contains no such gender exclusion. Precedent for male invocation exists under the Case of Marien the Unsworn, wherein a widower of the early Exodus period was granted a Custodial Hearth following the loss of kin and later founded a recognized Blooded House.

By the plain reading of the law, I meet the same criteria: unaligned, orphaned, of legal age, and under the protection of Crown officers at the time of discovery.

It is therefore within reason and equity that I request similar treatment—not as a novelty or privilege, but as lawful protection against coercion, confiscation, or forced custodianship.

Statement of Intent

I have no desire to disrupt the order of the Triumvirate realms. My only intent is to live peaceably, contribute to the defense and prosperity of the Crown, and retain the dignity afforded to any free being within its law.

To deny this petition on the grounds of custom rather than statute would be to admit that precedent and protection apply only when convenient to power, and not in the spirit in which the Widow’s Charter was written.

Declaration

Submitted respectfully, under seal of personal oath and hand,

Corporal Aleric TanimFormerly of the United States Marine CorpsForeign-born subject presently in custody of the CrownWitnessed at the Citadel of the Triumvirate, Capital of Atherai

(Signed in my own hand, and, where the quill failed, by the grace of a borrowed pen.)

When he finished, he read it twice—once as a Marine, once as a man who knew the people reading it would be looking for any excuse to throw it out. It wasn’t perfect. Hell, it wasn’t even close. But it said what it needed to: *I exist, I know your rules, and I’m playing by them until I can beat you with them.*

He blew gently on the ink, watching it dry. Then he folded the parchment, stamped his thumbprint in the corner, and slid it into an envelope.

“Not bad for a guy without a JD,” he said under his breath.

He leaned back in the chair and smirked faintly. “Cover your ass, Marine. Step one in every war.”

The summons came two days later, carried not by magic but by an exhausted clerk in silver-trimmed robes. She stood stiffly in the doorway, eyes fixed anywhere but on him, as though proximity alone might draw suspicion.

“By order of the High Judiciary,” she said, her voice thin with nerves, “the person known as *Aleric Tanim* is to present himself before the Court of Adjudication at first bell.”

Al took the parchment, still warm from the wax seal, and looked at the symbol pressed into it—three interlocking crowns forming a triangle. “Guess my fan mail arrived,” he muttered.

The clerk didn’t laugh. She only bowed and left.

The courtroom wasn’t what he expected. It wasn’t grand or gilded, but cold—limestone and echoing marble, banners muted by age. Three seats stood upon a dais, each occupied by a woman in judicial black and silver. The one in the center, gray-haired but sharp-eyed, looked as if she’d been carved from the same stone as the walls.

To either side, nobles and legal aides from the various houses murmured, their silks whispering like wings. He recognized some of the crests: Pryce, Catrin’s lineage, Vale’s garrison. The air smelled of wax, ink, and old judgment.

He was made to stand on a circular seal worked into the floor — a sunburst of gold and white marble. A chain of light bound his wrists loosely, more ceremonial than a physical restraint.

“*Aleric Tanim,*” the presiding magistrate said, her tone smooth and heavy with authority. “You stand before this Court as the subject of three petitions filed by noble Houses Pryce, Arwen, and Vale, each asserting claim or guardianship over your person under various statutes of bloodline, salvage, or military custody.”

The words felt like stones dropping one by one into a well.

“By order of the Triumvirate, these claims have been consolidated for review. You are to be examined under oath and observation. Do you understand the nature of this hearing?”

Al glanced around the hall. “More or less,” he said dryly. “Back home, we’d call it a custody dispute.”

A ripple of murmurs followed. The magistrate’s eyebrow twitched. “You will answer plainly, foreigner.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

They began the questioning — his origin, his magic, his conduct since discovery. Every answer he gave seemed to tighten the invisible net. When he described summoning his weapons, the clerks whispered like bees. When he mentioned the System, several of the aides exchanged knowing looks.

Finally, after what felt like hours, the questioning paused.

The presiding magistrate leaned forward, folding her hands. “You have been spoken for by three noble lines, each of which claims your protection and your service. The Court recognizes no precedence of men in law; therefore, your standing must be determined by circumstance.”

Her voice softened slightly — the ritual mercy before the hammer fell. “Before we render our determination, do you have *anything* you wish to say in your defense or to clarify your position?”

Every eye in the chamber turned to him.

Al straightened, taking a breath. “Yeah,” he said, his tone measured but steady. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

He reached into his coat and drew out a folded piece of parchment — crisp, sealed with wax, written in neat block letters by a Marine who knew how to write so that an officer would actually read it.

“This,” he said, holding it up, “is a petition filed under your own law — *The Law of Hearth and Holding*. The Widow’s Charter, I think you call it.”

A ripple of confusion passed through the chamber. One of the junior judges frowned. “That law is reserved for widows and unaligned women—”

“Funny thing about that,” Al interrupted, stepping forward. “It doesn’t actually *say* that anywhere. I checked.”

The presiding magistrate took the parchment from the attendant who rushed forward to collect it. Her eyes scanned the lines. Her lips moved silently once, then twice. Then she looked up at him, her gaze sharper than before.

“This law was written for protection, not for… challenge,” she said carefully.

He nodded. “Ma’am, I’m not challenging anything. I’m just asking to be treated like a person instead of a prize. That Charter’s meant to protect the

unaligned and orphaned, right? Well, that's me to a tee. I figure it's better to live under the Crown's law than in anyone else's grasp."

A murmur spread like wildfire through the chamber — shock, disbelief, and a few incredulous laughs from the nobles who clearly thought it impossible.

The magistrate's gavel struck once. "Silence."

Then, after a moment, she looked at him again. "You understand that this action will anger every House present? That invoking this law could place you at odds with the Triumvirate's oldest customs?"

Al's mouth twitched in something almost like a smile. "Ma'am, back where I come from, upsetting customs is practically our national sport."

That earned a few snorts from the guards.

The magistrate sat back slowly, studying him. "Very well. The Court will recess to deliberate."

As she rose, the clerks swarmed around her like crows, carrying his petition as though it were some dangerous relic.

Al stood alone in the circle, the chain of light still shimmering faintly around his wrists.

He exhaled through his nose and muttered under his breath, "Well, Corporal… congratulations. You just sued the Crown."

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Chapter Thirty-One

CHAPTER 31

The hall had emptied except for the guards and the three presiding judges. The great doors closed behind Al, and the echo of the latch seemed to seal him out of his own fate.

Behind the dais, the magistrates descended into the smaller chamber that served as the Court's private recess—a half-circle of stone, lit by a suspended sphere of pale light. The air inside felt charged with the weight of the state.

The eldest of the three, **Magistrate Ysanne Valeor**, broke the silence first. "Three Houses filed competing claims within two days of his arrival. If we award him to one, we set the others at each other's throats."

The youngest, **Magistrate Elowen of Corvyn**, snorted. "You make it sound like that's new. The Houses have bickered since the first crown fell. This—" she gestured toward the parchment laid on the table "—is different. The man has found a crack in the law and wedged himself into it."

Ysanne traced a finger along the edge of the petition, her expression unreadable. "He's not wrong. The Widow's Charter was never gendered. It only became custom. The *text* allows this claim."

Elowen scowled. "He's a man, Ysanne. A fertile one. If we grant him this, he will have independence no noblewoman can control. That is a precedent that will echo for generations."

The third magistrate, **Matron Solenne Pryce**, older still and sharp as a whetstone, leaned back in her chair. "Exactly why we must consider it carefully. Deny it outright, and we provoke three great Houses and every scholar of law in the realm. Grant it blindly, and we hand a weapon to chaos."

The room fell quiet for a time, broken only by the faint whisper of the sphere above them.

Finally, Ysanne said, "He cannot be given to any House. That much is certain. But nor can we keep him here; his presence would draw petitions

daily. The Charter gives us a middle path—a legal fiction that can hold reality together."

Solenne nodded slowly. "Recognize his petition under *Article I*, grant him provisional status as Custodian of his own Hearth. Bind him by oath to the Crown alone."

Elowen frowned. "That makes him free."

"That makes him *ours*," Solenne corrected. "By law, he would owe fealty directly to the Crown and to the Triumvirate, not to any lineage. No House can claim what is already sworn to the Crown."

Elowen hesitated, then nodded once. "A clever chain. One he might even thank us for."

Ysanne allowed herself a thin smile. "Better he build his own cage than resent the one we forged."

They stood, gathering their robes, and returned to the chamber above.

When Al was brought back in, the light of the courtroom had changed—longer, colder, filtering through the high lattice windows like judgment itself. The three magistrates resumed their seats, their robes heavy with authority and something harder to name.

Magistrate Ysanne rose first, her voice carrying the weight of centuries. "The Court has reviewed your petition under the *Law of Hearth and Holding*. The text is found valid. Custom is found wanting."

A low murmur swept through the gathered nobles—part disbelief, part fear.

Ysanne did not wait for silence. "We have read your petition and will assign you a consul—an appointed advisor and representative of the Crown. This matter touches precedent and power alike. It will not be rushed."

Elowen stood next, her tone measured but edged with quiet satisfaction. "The Court will take this under advisement and reconvene in two days' time. During that interval, the Triumvirate will be informed and consulted. This case carries implications that reach beyond any single House."

She lifted the parchment—now bearing three wax seals, fresh and gleaming—and handed it to an attendant. Al caught the brief glance exchanged between the judges and the Triumvirate envoy seated in the shadows of the hall. It wasn't approval. It was coordination.

He wasn't the only one who noticed. The noble spectators stiffened, and even the guards looked uneasy.

Al stood still on the sunburst seal as the silence thickened. He could almost *feel* the decision being shaped behind those eyes—not for justice, but for strategy.

Elowen's final words cut through the hush. "Until that time, you will remain under watch in the Citadel. You are not confined, merely… preserved."

Al inclined his head, more out of habit than respect. "Preserved. Got it."

He turned to leave, boots echoing on marble. Behind him, the whispers followed—cautious, hungry, fearful.

"The man invoked the Charter." "They'll never let the Houses have him." "A new House? Impossible—unless…"

At the far end of the hall, Al paused. Through the vast doorway, the daylight looked brighter than before—almost defiant against the gloom.

He didn't know what they were planning, but he'd seen those looks before—generals around a map, moving pieces they didn't expect to survive.

"Two days," he murmured. "Yeah. Plenty of time to decide who owns me next."

Then he stepped out, the heavy doors closing behind him like the seal on a vault.

The Council of the Triumvirate did not meet in the light. It met in the storm.

The chamber atop the Citadel's heart tower was wreathed in dark banners and open to the rain-swept sky. Lightning flared beyond the slitted windows, casting the three Matriarchs into relief against the gloom.

The storm hadn't abated. It howled outside the Council Chamber like the fury of old gods, rattling the stained glass and drowning the low hum of the wards that kept the Triumvirate's meeting private.

Three women sat at the crescent table beneath the high banners of state—the *Three Who Rule in the Crown's Shadow.*

Matron-Regent Sereine was the first to break the silence. "Three Houses claim him. Three noble bloodlines that were supposed to end at Aelthar's Maw—alive, and now united by a man. The Court may as well have poured oil on an open flame."

Across from her, **High Chancellor Liora** traced the rim of her goblet, calm but wary. "We cannot suppress the news. The nobles are already

whispering. If we deny their petitions outright, we risk rebellion in the councils. If we grant any one of them, the other two will turn to arms."

"And if we do nothing?" asked **Commander Rhienne**, her armor dull in the candlelight. "They'll start breeding alliances before the month's end. I've seen what happens when ambition and scarcity share a bed."

The Regent slammed her hand down, silencing them both. "Enough! We cannot let one man become the axis of our undoing."

Liora's gaze shifted toward the parchment bearing Al's petition—still sealed, its edges darkened from handling. "He invoked a law older than any of us," she said quietly. "The Charter recognizes the orphaned and unaligned. He has made himself legally Crown property without ever intending to. We can use that."

Sereine's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

Liora's voice gained the faintest edge of cunning. "If we recognize his claim under the *Law of Hearth and Holding*, we may define what that 'hearth' entails. It need not be symbolic. It can be binding."

Rhienne caught the implication first. "You mean marriage."

"Precisely," said Liora. "By Crown decree, we join him to all three daughters. They are bound to him—and thus to each other—under law. None of their Houses can claim him without also claiming their rivals."

The Regent leaned back slowly, the fury in her expression cooling to cold calculation. "A political union to neutralize three bloodlines at once."

Rhienne nodded. "And if he sires children, they belong to a new House under Crown authority. *Our* House. One we shape from the beginning."

"The others will protest," Sereine warned.

"Let them," Liora said, her tone dry. "By the time they untangle the legality, he'll already be married. The ink will outlast the outrage."

The Regent considered this in silence for a moment, then reached for the petitions of the three Houses. She held them over the brazier, one by one.

Pryce. Arwen. Vaughn.

The flames caught quickly.

"Enough of their squabbling," she said, watching the seals melt. "They wanted a claim. They'll get it—equally. And in doing so, they'll get nothing they can use."

Rhienne smirked. "You realize what this makes him?"

Sereine's gaze remained on the fire. "A living treaty."

"And the women?" Liora asked softly.

“Collateral,” the Regent replied. “The cost of peace.”

The thunder outside cracked so loud it made the chamber tremble.

Liora leaned forward. “Then we are agreed. The Court will reconvene at dawn. We will announce the marriage decree under Article Three—*Clause of Issue and Continuance*.”

“Let it be done,” said Sereine, her voice a verdict.

The brazier’s flame flared high, then sank to embers.

And with it, three noble Houses were undone—and a man from another world found himself turned into the foundation of a kingdom’s survival.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

CHAPTER 32

The Hall of Verdicts rang with the low hum of mana-lights and whispered expectation. The banners of the Triumvirate's three pillars—Crown, Court, and Clergy—hung above the dais, their silken folds motionless despite the restless air. Beneath them, the three Judges of Balance took their seats.

Lady Ysanne of the Crown struck the gavel once. "The petition of House Arwen, House Pryce, and House Vaughn has been reviewed and deliberated." Her voice echoed like drawn steel. "The Crown finds the proposal valid. Custom, however, is found wanting."

A murmur rippled through the chamber—shock, disbelief, perhaps envy.

Elowen Pryce rose first, golden hair catching the white light. "Then we are acknowledged?" she asked, though her tone made it clear she already knew the answer.

"You are," Ysanne said. "The bond you seek with the foreign-born male, the one called *Aleric Tanim*, is sanctioned under Crown and System alike. The Court recognizes him as a free husband of state."

The declaration struck like thunder. Even the guards at the doors shifted uneasily.

Matron-Mother Aurum, seated among the gallery of observing Houses, gave a sharp, delighted laugh. "So the fates favor chaos once again," she murmured, earning herself a warning glance from the clergy bench.

Ysanne raised her hand for silence. "However," she continued, "in accordance with precedent under the Law of Hearth and Holding, a proper House of Seven must be formed. The union is incomplete until the requisite number of wives is met. The Crown therefore decrees that three additional consorts be chosen to complete the bond."

Gasps and furious whispers followed.

Catrin Arwen's jaw tightened, her knuckles whitening where her hands rested on her sword belt. "Three *more*?" she hissed under her breath. "As though we were stock to be tallied."

Elowen Pryce tried to hide her smirk behind a veil-fan. “It’s politics, dear heart. The Crown means to dilute the scandal with inclusion.”

Lady Rhyosyn Vaughn rose from her seat, her voice rising like a spark in oil. “We will not suffer outsiders to share what was earned by ordeal! This was *our* petition, not a marketplace bargain.”

Before Ysanne could respond, Matron-Mother Aurum stood, her rings flashing. “Be grateful the Court grants even this. The realm cannot afford a House founded on three women alone. Tradition must be upheld, else every ambitious sister will think herself a Matron.”

To her left, Matron-Mother D’Kara of House Veyne merely inclined her head, expression unreadable. “The balance is wise,” she said softly. “Let seven bind him—if he survives the binding.”

That silenced even Rhyosyn.

Ysanne struck the gavel again. “The decision of the Crown is final. Within the next turning of the moon, the Houses of Arwen, Pryce, and Vaughn will name one new sister and shall name one new sister each month, subject to Crown approval. The bond shall be sealed in the Cathedral of Light.”

The assembly bowed. Not one of them truly relaxed.

As the judges withdrew, the noble mothers began to whisper—plans, bribes, alliances forming in real time.

Lady Catrin’s voice was low but fierce as she turned to her companions. “They’ve turned our victory into a trap. Every House in the realm will try to plant a daughter among us now.”

Elowen’s smile was cold and calculating. “Then we choose carefully, before they choose for us.”

Rhyosyn’s hand twitched toward her spell ring. “And what of him?” she asked.

Elowen looked toward the distant chamber doors where Aleric had been escorted earlier, her gaze softening for only a heartbeat. “He’ll learn, soon enough, what it means to be the heart of a House.”

Above them, the mana-lights dimmed, and the echo of the gavel’s last strike lingered like thunder fading across the sky.

***

The chamber below the Hall of Verdicts was small, circular, and rich with incense and shadow. No banners hung here—only the faint scent of old parchment and candle smoke. The guards outside had saluted him stiffly, as if unsure whether to treat him as prisoner or peer.

Inside waited two men.

The first was tall and gray-haired, his bearing that of a man who could have once commanded armies but now commanded silence. Rings of authority gleamed on his fingers, each engraved with the sigil of a different House.

The second was younger—barely older than Aleric himself—wearing a scholar's robe trimmed with House colors. His posture was too perfect, his smile too careful.

The elder gestured to a chair. "Sit, Aleric Tanim. I am Tavrin Veyne, Consort-Patriarch of House Veyne. This is my apprentice, Kael Pryce. You are here because the Triumvirate has seen fit to place you among us."

Aleric sat, feeling the eyes of both men weigh him. "Among you," he repeated. "You mean… husbands?"

Tavrin inclined his head. "Stewards of the hearth. Every Matron rules her House, yes, but it is we who keep it warm and breathing. We raise the children, guide the servants, tend the estates. We are the hands that keep the home turning when the women are called to rule."

Kael leaned forward, his tone eager, almost proud. "And the tongue that smooths quarrels, the eye that notices when a daughter is unhappy, the hand that knows how to run a household ledger better than any merchant. That is our duty."

Aleric frowned. "You make it sound like the men are the ones holding the mop."

Tavrin's mouth twitched. "If you mean responsibility, then yes. You will oversee the kitchens, the nursery, the schooling of heirs, and the discipline of servants. You will manage estates, appointments, and the comfort of your wives. A well-run home is a fortress. A careless one is a scandal."

"Scandal," Kael added, "is deadlier than war in this realm."

Aleric folded his arms. "So you're telling me I've gone from the Corps to… housekeeping."

Tavrin chuckled, the sound dry as parchment. "Housekeeping, diplomacy, and survival. Every man of standing learns that command at home is subtler than any battlefront. When your wives go to court, you must make their

absence invisible. When they return, everything must look as though it ran itself."

Aleric leaned back slightly. "You're talking about running a small country."

Kael smiled. "Precisely."

They led him down a corridor lit by magelamps. On either wall, the carved crests of noble houses gleamed in the light: Aurum, Vaughn, Pryce, Arwen. The weight of history pressed close.

"The Council of Husbands meets here when called," Tavrin explained. "We exchange methods, share lessons, and sometimes warnings. Our wives rule the realm, but we rule the rhythm of daily life. Children are molded here, servants trained, inheritances safeguarded."

Aleric grunted. "And no one outside knows?"

"Not precisely," Tavrin said. "They prefer not to see the labor behind the order."

They entered a circular hall filled with long tables covered in ledgers, children's lessons, and lists of household accounts. The smell of ink and tea clung to the air.

Tavrin touched one of the open books. "This is the true ledger of a House—births, marriages, budgets, gifts, punishments, holidays. A husband who manages well keeps peace for generations. One who fails brings ruin faster than any army."

Kael nodded. "We are raised to know every servant by name, every tutor's strength, every daughter's mood."

Tavrin looked to Aleric. "You will find that your worth here does not lie in war or invention. It lies in the order you create and the legacy you protect. You must become the balance between seven women with seven wills."

Aleric gave a quiet snort. "So, I'm the babysitter."

The elder's smile returned, faint and knowing. "In the same way a general babysits his army, yes."

The younger then said, "You are the one who none must know is in charge, a silent and invisible hand behind the throne."

They stopped before a silver-etched mirror along the far wall. Its surface rippled faintly, as though disturbed by an unseen breeze, and it reflected all three of them with unsettling clarity—the older father-figure standing firm,

the young apprentice trying to look composed, and the foreigner caught between two worlds, unsure which claimed him.

Aleric shifted his weight. The mirror felt too cold, too alive.

Then a faint **rune shimmered** across its surface—sharp, angular, and absolutely *not* from this realm's sigilcraft. The symbol glowed a dull green, pulsing once … twice … before collapsing inward like an eye snapping shut.

The older man grunted, jaw tightening. "Someone's scrying."

But Tavrin's expression changed in a way Aleric did not like—less irritation, more calculation, as if the pattern of the rune meant something more dangerous than mere spying.

"That wasn't any House's working," Tavrin murmured. "Not guild, not faith, not court." He touched the mirror with two fingers, then drew back as though expecting it to bite. "Whoever that was… they're not supposed to even *reach* through these wards."

Kael's easy smile faded. "And if they can reach, they can take." His eyes flicked to Aleric. "Keep your guard high, Corporal. Foreign hands sometimes covet what the Crown undervalues."

Aleric felt the hair on his arms lift. Foreign. Not local. Someone out there had *aimed* for him—through heavy warding, through Triumvirate defenses—and still almost made contact.

Tavrin rested a hand on the younger man's shoulder, grounding the moment with the weight of quiet authority.

"Remember this, Corporal. In this realm, a man's battlefield is his home. His victories are quiet ones—well-fed children, calm servants, peaceful nights, and satisfied wives. Fail there, and no armor will save you from what follows."

Aleric tore his gaze away from the mirror's now-innocent reflection. "Guess I'll need a crash course in domestic warfare."

Kael huffed out a breath—half laugh, half warning—and stepped back toward him.

"Then welcome to command of House Tanim." A beat. "And keep your eyes open. Someone else seems eager to command you first."

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Chapter Thirty-Three

CHAPTER 33

Two armored figures emerged from the shadowed archway—Evan and Idris, each wearing the lacquered half-cloaks of the Crown's internal guard. Their arrival was wrong for this room; guards didn't normally step anywhere near Matron chambers.

Both women bowed.

"Corporal," Idris said, straightening. "By order of the Triumvirate, you are to have a permanent security detail from this moment forward."

Aleric raised an eyebrow. "I thought the palace wards were supposed to make that unnecessary."

A tension passed between the women.

"They are," Evan said. "That's why this is… concerning."

Idris stepped closer, lowering her voice though the room was empty. "There were attempts last night. Someone tried to circumvent the outer wards. Subtle work—foreign craft. They didn't get through, but they left echoes. Runes, residue, and a… signature."

"A signature?"

Evan nodded. "Not one we recognize. And not from any House or guild in this realm."

Aleric felt the cold crawl down his spine. "Then who was it? Who would even try?"

The guards exchanged a glance, and Idris answered carefully. "There are other realms beyond ours—border kingdoms, shadow courts, old bloodlines that value men for reasons different than the Triumvirate. Some would take great interest in a new male line."

A silence followed—thick, uncomfortable.

Aleric finally spoke. "So what happens now?"

Idris straightened. "Now we become your shadows. Until the source is identified—or detained—you do not walk the halls alone."

Evan's tone softened but carried steel beneath it. "Whoever reached for you already has your name, your image, and your scent on the wards. We're

here to make sure they don’t get their hands on anything else.”

“Quiet victories,” he murmured. “And unseen wars.” Aleric exhaled slowly. “I’m starting to understand.”

As the guards finished their explanation, the door behind them opened with a soft hiss—no footsteps, no announcement.

A figure stepped through.

He was young—barely a teenager—but carried himself with the rigid discipline of someone trained to move without sound. His uniform was a stripped-down variant of the palace guard’s: dark cloth reinforced with plated leather, no cape, no insignia. Practical. Plain. Forgettable.

Except for his hands—seven fingers on the left, arranged unevenly like a craftsman had set them wrong. He moved with a slight limp

Idris cleared his throat. “This is Ravel. He has been assigned to your inner chamber detail.”

Evan added, “He is mute from birth. His… differences made him unsuitable for most paths. But he has been trained as a silent Guard since childhood. He communicates through signs and written glyphs. Loyal. Disciplined. Unobtrusive.”

Ravel bowed his head once. Not shy—measured. Eyes sharp as flint.

Aleric looked between the guards. “He'll be inside my quarters? Always?”

“Always,” Idris confirmed. “Your fiances may come and go, attendants as well, but Ravel does not leave his post unless relieved. Consider him… insurance the Triumvirate wants close at hand.”

Aleric frowned. “Insurance for me or insurance on me?”

Ravel’s expression didn’t change, but one eyebrow lifted—just slightly—as if acknowledging the question’s accuracy.

Tavrin answered quietly, “Both, Corporal. A man who cannot speak is ideal for overhearing what others shouldn’t say. And one born outside polite society is easily forgotten.”

Aleric studied the young man again. Ravel stood perfectly still, breathing slow and even, gaze unblinking. Not hostile. Not afraid. Just… present.

He raised a hand and traced a quick series of signs in the air.

Evan translated. “He says: *I protect what I am given.*”

Aleric nodded. “Then I suppose we’ll learn to work together.”

Ravel tapped his fist to his heart in affirmation.

***

Aleric finished wrapping the billets in cloth and stood, stretching the ache out of his shoulders. The privacy wards hummed faintly, their soft ripple brushing against his skin like static.

He glanced toward the inner doorway.

Ravel stood exactly where he always did—silent, still, alert. The mismatched eyes watched the room without judgment, without curiosity, without end.

“Didn’t hear you move,” Aleric muttered.

Ravel signed a brief gesture, one Aleric now recognized after a week of exposure: *Not meant to be heard.*

Aleric huffed. “Yeah. I’m getting that.”

He bent, gathering the billets into a pouch. “How’s it look out there?”

Ravel’s fingers flicked again.

Calm.

Then, after a beat:

Too calm.

Aleric paused. “You feel something?”

Ravel tilted his hand side to side. Not yes, not no—*uncertainty with a warning edge.* His gaze shifted briefly toward the outer wall, where the city lay beyond the palace wards.

Aleric followed the look. “Those ward attempts from last week?” he asked quietly. “You think someone’s still trying?”

Ravel signed slower this time.

Patterns wrong. Air changed. Wards strained… but from far away.

Aleric frowned. “Idris and Evan said probing the wards takes serious work. Whoever attempted that had reach.”

Ravel nodded once.

“Any idea who?”

Ravel hesitated, then signed a single word.

Realms.

Plural.

Aleric let out a slow breath. “Great. So not just one enemy. A selection.”

Ravel didn’t correct him.

Instead, he stepped forward just enough to place himself between Aleric and the door—an instinctive guard's gesture, as natural as breathing.

Aleric gave him a dry look. "You know, if someone's going to try something, they should at least wait until after the caravan leaves. I've got enough on my plate."

Ravel lifted one eyebrow in what might have been silent agreement… or amusement. Hard to tell. The young man's expressions were subtle, but not unreadable.

He pointed to Aleric's new billets, then made the sign for *danger* with a small twist of his fingers—an indication that summoning in warded chambers carried risks. Aleric waved him off.

"Yeah, yeah. I read the advisory. Almost blew a vein last time; won't happen again."

Ravel's stare suggested he wasn't convinced.

Aleric sighed, cinching the pouch shut. "Look, thanks for keeping watch. I know you probably don't get a choice in the matter."

Ravel touched two fingers to his chest.

I serve the charge I am given.

The palace's wardline pulsed faintly, a soft vibration through the stones.

Ravel's head snapped toward the window. Not alarmed—alert.

Aleric instinctively reached for a weapon he didn't have. "What is it?"

Ravel relaxed after a few seconds and signed:

Not breach. Distant ripple. Someone watching.

Aleric grimaced. "Again? They really want a piece of me."

Ravel didn't disagree.

***

Aleric woke with a start.

At first he didn't know why—no sound, no movement, nothing obvious disturbed the darkened suite. But then he caught it:

A strange, sweet smell.

Not incense. Not lamp oil. Not anything from the kitchens.

It crawled across his senses like a whisper made of flowers and rot.

He pushed upright in the bed, blinking hard. "Ravel?" he murmured.

No answer.

Moonlight from the eastward window cast silver bars across the floor… and through them, Aleric saw it: thin, pale smoke curling under the door like a living thing.

His heartbeat kicked into gear.

“Ravel,” he snapped, sharper this time.

A shadow shifted in the far corner. Ravel’s silhouette moved—quick, precise—but before the young guard could reach the door, the smoke thickened, drifting upward in tendrils that glimmered faintly with motes of gold.

Aleric gagged as his head swam.

Instinct screamed. He reached for the System—visualizing steel, a blade, anything.

The familiar pulse of power rose—

—and slammed into a wall.

A blue overlay flickered across his vision.

[SYSTEM ALERT — SUMMONING BLOCKED] External Interference Detected Source: **Non-local Arcane Field** Summoning, Invocation, and Material Transfer: **Locked**

Aleric cursed under his breath. “Oh, that’s bad.”

The smoke rolled further in now, carrying a sweet, narcotic heaviness. His thoughts slipped, stumbled, fuzzing at the edges like smeared ink.

He staggered out of bed, bracing a hand on the wall.

“Ravel—don’t breathe it—!”

Too late.

Ravel threw his cloak over his nose and mouth, but even through the fabric he faltered, swaying slightly as he reached the door. His long fingers brushed the handle—and then he recoiled as though shocked. The metal glowed with faint violet sigils, etched from the outside.

Someone had sealed the room.

Aleric tried to focus. The smell was everywhere now. Honey and crushed petals. Something metallic underneath. His vision blurred, doubled.

A second notification pulsed weakly.

[STATUS EFFECT ACQUIRED] Confused (Mild → Moderate) • Cognitive impairment increasing • Reaction time diminished • Spatial judgment degraded Cause: **Inhaled Enchantment** Countermeasure: Clean air, distance from source, or anti-charm stimulus

Aleric grabbed the edge of the low table to steady himself. “Ravel… someone’s in the wards. Someone got past the guards.”

Ravel shook his head sharply—**not past**, he signed with stiff, trembling fingers. **Through.** His hands shook so violently the final sign almost fell apart.

The smoke coiled higher, sweet and cloying, and the confusion flooding Aleric’s mind sharpened into a psychic pull—an urging to sit, lie down, surrender.

Rest, something whispered beneath his thoughts. *Sleep. Be still.*

“No,” he growled, slapping himself hard enough to make his ears ring. “Not tonight.”

Ravel stumbled toward the window, prying at the shutters, but the latch refused to budge—violet runes pulsed along the frame, sealing it shut. His breath hitched, eyes streaming as he tried again, more desperately.

Aleric’s knees buckled. He caught himself, chest heaving. The smoke tasted like syrup and metal, making each breath feel thick, intoxicating. He forced himself toward the wash basin, splashing water over a towel, pressing it over his mouth and nose.

The world swam… but sharpened enough to steady his legs.

Footsteps whispered behind the door.

The handle turned.

Violet sigils shattered like glass.

Aleric dropped into a fighting crouch, knife gripped in white-knuckled fists, wearing nothing but military-issue boxers and stubborn fury.

The door slammed inward.

The first attacker surged through—a woman in lacquered armor, hood shadowing her face. She moved fast, too fast, but Aleric moved on instinct, driving forward with a downward slash. Steel bit into flesh. She crumpled with a wet gasp.

The second woman leapt over her falling body.

Aleric met her with overwhelming force—he slammed her into the stone wall so hard her spine popped and bent at a sickening angle. She slid to the floor.

Three more women poured in behind her.

Ravel hurled himself toward the nearest intruder, silent as always but deadly-fast—until one of the women flicked her wrist, sending a crescent-shaped blade of glowing air across the room.

It struck him in the chest.

Ravel’s body convulsed—and then he collapsed, folding to the ground without a sound.

“RAVEL!” Aleric roared, voice cracking.

Pain and rage cut through the confusion like fire through fog.

Two attackers rushed him at once. He ducked under one strike, drove his shoulder into the woman’s throat, and felt something snap beneath the impact. She gagged, collapsing.

The other swung a hooked staff—Aleric turned into the arc, caught the weapon, and yanked. The woman stumbled forward, right into his knee. Her jaw shattered against it.

Her body hit the floor limp.

For a heartbeat, Aleric stood over them, chest heaving, towel soaked, blood spattered across his arms—

—then the smoke rolled in thicker, shimmering gold. His vision doubled. His knife arm drooped.

Another notification pulsed weakly in the corner of his vision.

[STATUS EFFECT WORSENING] Confused → Severe Motor Control Degradation: Increasing Perception Unstable Resistance: Failing

Someone muttered foreign words outside the doorframe.

Four more women appeared—cloaked, armed, coordinated. One carried chains that glowed with runic script. Another held a bowl emitting the cursed smoke.

Aleric stumbled back, knife slipping in his grip.

“Sheathe your blade, foreigner,” one woman called, voice cold. “Your death is not required.”

Aleric spat blood. “Take me alive? Try.”

He lunged.

It wasn’t clean. It wasn’t tactical. It was a Marine half-poisoned and furious, fighting with stubborn muscle and blind instinct.

He rammed his shoulder into the first woman hard enough to crack ribs—but the next caught him with a stun sigil across his ribs. Agony lit fire down his side.

He swung wildly, catching another across the cheek with the knife’s pommel. She dropped.

Two remained.

The smoke thickened again. His knife slipped from his fingers.

Aleric fell to one knee.

“Bind him,” one woman commanded.

The chains struck his skin—cold, burning, crawling with magic. He snarled, trying to wrench free, but his limbs refused to obey. He fought until his muscles trembled, until the last spark of resistance guttered beneath the haze overtaking his senses.

Through the ringing in his ears, he saw Ravel’s still form on the floor—blood pooling beneath him.

Something inside Aleric cracked.

He tried to stand again—to kill, to break, to die fighting—

—but a final plume of smoke engulfed him, and the confusion sharpened into a crushing weight.

The last thing he saw before darkness swallowed him was a woman bending over him, her eyes bright with triumph and something like anticipation.

Then everything went black.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

CHAPTER 34

[SYSTEM ALERT — CRITICAL QUEST TRIGGERED]
A HUSBAND TAKEN
Bonded Husband: Aleric Tanim — Status: Removed by hostile force Location: UNKNOWN Recovery Required: IMMEDIATE Penalty for Failure: Permanent Loss Penalty for Delay: Diplomatic Catastrophe

Quest Instigator: *Aleric Tanim (involuntary)*

Catrin was out of bed before the message even finished resolving, her body reacting faster than her thoughts. The blue System window still hovered above her pillow, casting cold light across the room.

[CRITICAL QUEST — A HUSBAND TAKEN]

Her pulse slammed once—twice—then dropped into the steady, predatory rhythm drilled into every daughter of House Arwen.

She bared her teeth at the glowing text.

“How dare they…” she hissed.

She wasn’t even sure she *wanted* the man yet. Aleric Tanim was a storm she hadn’t decided to weather. But someone—some foreign bitch—had dared to lay a hand on what was *hers by decree*?

No.

No, that would not stand.

Her hand closed around the hilt of the sword leaning by her bedside, fingers curling so tightly the leather creaked. The weapon felt reassuringly familiar, grounding her even as panic tore through her chest.

She didn’t bother fully dressing—snatched a tunic, boots half-laced, cloak thrown over one shoulder. Her braid came undone as she moved, dark strands sticking to her neck. She didn’t care.

She was already in motion.

She slammed her chamber door open hard enough that one of the hinges squealed. Two night-servants jumped, nearly dropping their lanterns.

“Lady Catrin—?! It’s the middle of—”

“Wake my mother,” Catrin snapped. “NOW. We have a palace breach.”

Their eyes widened. No woman of Arwen said those words lightly.

As she barreled down the corridor, the faint tremor of alarms echoed through the estate—bells deep and resonant, the kind only rung when war or disaster touched the capital. Doors opened. Sisters and aunts emerged bleary-eyed. Servants scurried to their stations.

House Arwen was waking.

And waking angry.

Good, she thought savagely. *Let them know our rage.*

She didn’t have time to wait for the Matron. She sprinted for the stables, cloak snapping behind her. The stable-master blinked at her disheveled appearance.

“L–Lady Catrin? Shall I rouse your escort—”

“No time.” She seized the reins of the nearest saddled mare. “Aleric has been taken. I ride for the Crown Palace.”

The woman paled, stepped aside. “Go with the House’s fury, my lady.”

She mounted and kicked hard.

The mare launched forward.

The city raced past her, cobblestones ringing beneath hooves. The cold night air clawed at her cheeks; fog curled around street corners. Lanterns guttered in the wind as she tore through narrow roads and cut across merchant squares.

The System notification still burned behind her eyes.

Removed by hostile force. Penalty for failure: Permanent loss.

Hold on, she begged silently, leaning forward to coax more speed. *Hold on just a little longer, you stubborn man. Hold on.*

The Crown Palace loomed into view—lanterns blazing, guards shouting orders, the night watch thick upon the walls. A ripple of fear passed through her.

The royal wards should never fail.

Not unless…

No. She refused that thought.

She thundered through the gate arch before anyone could stop her.

“Lady Arwen?” the guard captain called, startled. “What—by the Saints—?”

“No time!” she snapped, leaping from the horse before it even stopped moving. “There’s been an attack. The System issued a quest—Aleric is

gone.”

The woman’s face drained of color.

Catrin didn’t stay to explain. She sprinted up the palace steps, taking them three at a time, boots slapping stone.

By the time she reached the east residential wing, another figure was stumbling toward her—Elowen Pryce, barefoot, hair unpinned and wild, silk night-robe soaked from dew and torn at one hem.

“Tell me—tell me it isn’t true,” Elowen gasped, clutching the railing.

Catrin’s expression told her everything.

Elowen made a strangled sound.

Footsteps echoed behind them—Rhyosyn Vaughn appeared next, breathless, clutching her bookbag like a shield. One braid hung loose over her shoulder.

Her voice trembled. “Ladies…please tell me this is a mistake. The System—”

Catrin didn’t speak. She didn’t need to.

The three stood together—noble-born, trained to mistrust one another, political rivals spanning three powerful Houses—

—but in that hallway, hearts pounding in unison, they were nothing but three women bound to the same man.

Catrin pushed open Aleric’s cracked chamber door.

It hung crooked, splintered along the frame where a force spell had struck.

Inside—

Carnage.

Inside the door way were the guards bodies. Blood pooled across the stone floor, already darkening at the edges. A chair lay shattered. A table overturned. A blade—one of Aleric’s own—was buried to the hilt in the wall. Scorch marks from combat spells marred the plaster. Three bodies lay twisted on the ground, armored women in unfamiliar colors, necks snapped or throats crushed.

Aleric’s tunic was torn and trampled. A single shard of ward-crystal pulsed weakly in the corner.

And near the bed, half-hidden beneath a fallen tapestry—

—an insignia of Eisenwald, ripped from someone's armor.

Elowen covered her mouth, choking on a sob. Rhyosyn gripped the doorframe until her knuckles went white.

Catrin stepped deeper into the room, sword still in hand, voice barely above a whisper:

“He killed them. Three of them. Alone. Saints…he fought like a demon.” She then pointed at other stains. "Look, others were wounded.” Bending down she nodded "At least two…"

The System chimed again, cold and merciless.

[QUEST UPDATE — CRITICAL PATH]

Objective Added: *Recover Aleric Tanim before he crosses the realm border. *Hostile party is in motion. *Time sensitivity increased.*

The three women stared at each other—terrified, furious, trembling—

—and united.

The decision formed between them without speech, as natural as breath.

Rhyosyn stepped forward first.

“A blade remembers where it last tasted life,” she murmured. Her fingers brushed one of the fallen enemy knives—a lean, wicked thing of unfamiliar make. She lifted it carefully, cradling it in her palm as though it were a wounded bird.

Her voice dropped to a whisper of spellcraft.

“**Revelare viam… ostende quem occidisti…**”

The metal warmed, then glowed faintly. A pulse rippled through the chamber like a heartbeat.

The blade rose slowly from Rhyosyn’s hand, spinning once in the air, and then—

pointed.

A straight line. Absolute. Unerring.

Catrin’s breath caught—not in fear, but in fury sharpened to a blade’s edge.

Her eyes gleamed with a cold, eager fire.

“That direction,” Rhyosyn said, voice trembling with strain as she kept the spell active. “They’re moving quickly. And… southward. South–southwest.” Her brow furrowed. “That means they didn’t take a ship. They’re fleeing overland.”

Catrin’s lips curled into something far too predatory to be called a smile.

“Good,” she said softly.

Elowen swallowed, gathering her torn dignity and shattered composure into something resolute. “Why is that good?”

Catrin looked at her—at both of them.

“Because,” she said, lifting her sword, “if they had taken him to the docks, we would already be too late.”

She stepped past the corpses, eyes blazing.

“On land,” she growled, “they bleed more easily.”

Elowen flinched slightly at the violence in her tone—but didn’t disagree.

Rhyosyn lowered the blade-spell, shaking from the magical effort, but held her chin high.

“They can’t have more than an hour lead,” she said. “Less, if Aleric slowed them down first.”

“We will catch them,” Elowen breathed, more a vow than a statement.

Catrin strode toward the door, cloak snapping behind her like the wings of a hunting hawk.

“Come,” she said, voice low and lethal.

“We will carve their hearts out.”

***

Aleric came awake slowly, dragged up from darkness by pain.

Not sharp pain—*dull, blooming aches* across his ribs and shoulders, the kind he recognized from being manhandled, struck, or carried badly. His wrists throbbed where rough cord bit into skin. His head felt thick, stuffed with cotton. His mouth tasted like metal and dust.

But the worst of it was the pressure on his bladder.

Great. Nothing like waking kidnapped and needing to piss.

He forced himself to keep his eyes closed, breathing shallow, letting training take over. Play dead first. Open your eyes later. Learn the terrain. Learn the enemy.

He listened.

At first, there was only the rhythmic **creak** of wood under strain—the groan of axles, the subtle rattle of iron bindings, the gritty rumble of wheels turning over uneven ground. The floor beneath his back shifted, jolted, dipped.

A wagon. Definitely a wagon.

Probably moving fast.

Aleric fought down a groan as one jolt smacked his shoulder into the floorboards. He let only the smallest grunt escape and stilled again.

Voices drifted toward him. Female voices—always the damn women in this world—low and conversational, not expecting him to be awake.

"…pretty thing," one murmured, amusement lacing her tone.

Another snorted. "You ain't seen a man in so long any man would look pretty to you."

Soft laughter followed.

Aleric felt his jaw tighten.

Fantastic, he thought grimly. *Kidnapped by a comedy troupe.*

He took another breath—slow, quiet. The wagon rocked. A gust of cold night air slipped through slats or canvas. He smelled damp earth, old hay, sweat, and…something faint but sharp. Metal tang. Magic residue.

The women kept talking, though their voices dropped whenever the wagon creaked too loudly.

"…didn't expect him to take out Renna—split her damn spine…"

"…stronger than he looks…"

"…means the Queen will want him even more…"

Aleric's heartbeat hitched.

Queen? A Queen wanted him?

He kept his breathing even. Didn't flinch. Didn't react.

They spoke again, quieter now, as if reins or lanterns shifted up front.

"…don't say her name, idiot."

"…fine, fine, but she ordered this. All of it."

"…still don't see why we couldn't kill one of the wives too—would've made the border response cleaner—"

A sharp elbow thump and a hiss. "Shut up. We don't talk about that in front of *him.*"

They fell silent after that.

The wagon hit another rut.

Aleric's spine jarred. The boards groaned beneath him. His wrists burned where the bindings dug deeper with every lurch. His bladder ached, his head throbbed, and beneath it all simmered a cold, gathering fury.

Someone wants a war, he realized. *And they're planning to use me as the match.*

A faint chiming sound flickered at the edge of his consciousness—soft, clear, unmistakable.

The **System**.

He cracked one eye open just enough to view the notification hovering in the darkness.

[SYSTEM ALERT — PENDING LEVEL-UP]

Combat Log Recorded:

You have slain:

Eisenwald Operative (3)

Unidentified Spellcaster (1)

Shadow-Agent (1)

Experience Threshold Reached.

You may now advance to LEVEL 2.

Another window opened beneath it—larger, brighter, carrying the unmistakable weight of something important.

[LONG-DELAY REBALANCE BONUS GRANTED]

Your level-ups are delayed beyond optimal System calibration. Balancing compensation applied.

Bonus Attribute Points Awarded: +12

(Unassigned – allocate when safe)

Class Synchronization:

Marine → Survivor-Path Alignment Updated

Ability Expansion:

SUMMON CAPACITY DOUBLED Previous: 70 cubic inches **New Total: 140 cubic inches**

Warning: Warded or unstable magical environments may increase summoning strain.

Aleric stared at the glowing text, disbelief warring with grim satisfaction.

He had killed five of those armored bastards. Bare-handed. Tied, ambushed, and without advantage.

And now the System was catching up.

A slow, dangerous smile crept across his face as he closed the notification with the faintest flick of thought.

He kept still, muscles relaxed, breath even—Marine calm settling over him like a steel-plated shell.

So they want a war, he thought.

Fine.

His fingers curled experimentally against the bindings, testing their give, their angles, their weaknesses. He could summon something now—140 cubic inches was enough for a bevy of different weapons.

If they wanted a war, they were going to get an American war.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

CHAPTER 35

Aleric flexed his fingers, testing the rope around his wrists.

The fibers scraped his skin, coarse and unforgiving, but beneath the roughness he felt something colder—firmer. Not just cord. There was a bite to it when he moved, a subtle resistance that didn't belong to hemp alone.

Metal.

Thin strands braided through the rope, flexible enough to hide themselves until pressure was applied. Whoever had tied him knew the craft. The wrap was precise—a figure-eight cinched between the wrists, the kind that tightened when a man struggled instead of loosening. An anchor loop ran up toward his beltline, pinning his hands low and robbing him of leverage. Even dislocating a thumb wouldn't give him enough room to work.

Smart, he thought grimly.

They hadn't come unprepared.

He exhaled slowly through his nose and shifted his head just enough to map the space around him. Canvas above. Wooden boards beneath. The creak of a wagon in motion. Too dark to see, but close—too many bodies nearby to risk anything sloppy.

The answer presented itself immediately, as it always did.

A multi-tool. The standard-issue Marine one he'd carried for years. Compact. Reliable. The wire cutters alone would chew through the metal core if he could get the right angle.

But wire-core rope meant time. Leverage. Patience.

And before any of that, he needed to know what he was dealing with.

If the wagon was warded, summoning even something small could feel like trying to drag a safe through a keyhole. Worse—it could light him up like a signal flare.

He slowed his breathing, letting training take over. Dark-room drills. Sensory isolation. Feel first. Act second.

There it was.

A faint tingle brushed the edges of his awareness, like static crawling over skin. The sensation reminded him of walking beneath power lines during a storm, that low, constant hum you felt more than heard.

A ward.

Subtle. Active.

Low-grade, he judged. Directional. Meant to prevent teleportation or magical tracking rather than crush summoning outright. Still, even a mild ward could spike hard if pushed the wrong way.

Alright.

First objective: understand the edges.

He focused on the smallest thing he could imagine calling—not a tool, not a weapon, not even steel.

A washer.

Aluminum. Light. Something barely heavier than a thought. He pictured it clearly: the dull gray ring from his motor pool days, the feel of it resting against his fingertips, the slight warmth it picked up from skin.

The image settled. The conduit stirred.

He let a thread of power slide down it—

—and met resistance.

Not a wall. More like thick mud.

The magic moved, but sluggishly, dragging at him with a gentle pull that raised goosebumps along his forearms. A faint vibration hummed against his skin, the kind he associated with proximity alarms or low-voltage wiring.

Active ward. Weak, but awake.

He cut the summoning instantly.

No flash. No object. Just the echo of resistance fading away.

The wagon reacted anyway.

A subtle ripple passed through the wood beneath him, like the aftershock of a dropped pebble. The bindings around his wrists warmed—just slightly—and the metal core inside them vibrated once before settling.

A ward-thread woven into the rope itself.

Damn.

Not elite mage-hunters, but professionals. Someone had paid for expertise.

He went still and listened.

The guards up front continued their quiet banter. The woman nearest him rustled what sounded like a map or parchment. Someone yawned.

No raised voices. No sudden movement.

Good.

The ward hadn’t flared visibly.

He flexed his fingers again, carefully this time, testing circulation. The rope responded with a faint tightening, as if reminding him it was there.

He stopped.

The tool would still work. The multi-tool hadn’t stopped being the answer.

But timing mattered now.

Summoning it too early would risk lighting up the ward, and his captors were only a few feet away. He needed noise. Motion. A moment when the world around him was loud enough to swallow a spike.

A rut in the road.

Shouting guards.

Spooked horses.

He needed the right cover.

His bladder throbbed again, sharp and insistent.

Perfect, he thought dryly. Add that to the list.

He forced himself to relax, slowing his breathing until it mimicked near-sleep. Let his head loll. Let his jaw slacken.

A Marine waits. A Marine plans. A Marine strikes when the enemy is blind.

The wagon jolted over uneven ground. He let his body move with it, feigning deeper unconsciousness.

The ward’s presence was clearer now—a faint static buzzing along the back of his skull.

He would break it.

But not yet.

Canvas whispered.

Footsteps shifted closer.

“Hold up,” a woman murmured from the front bench. “Let me check him.”

Aleric let his eyelids flutter half-open, just enough to sell it. Corpsman tricks. Pulse slow. Breathing shallow and uneven.

Cool, callused fingers pressed against the back of his neck.

“Still warm,” she muttered.

“You must’ve hit him too hard,” another voice complained. “Queen’s damn lucky he didn’t die.”

“He’s tougher than that,” the woman said. “Besides—Renna got in his face first. He just fought back harder than we expected.”

She leaned closer. Breath ghosted over his cheek.

Aleric didn’t move. Not a twitch.

“…yeah,” she said finally. “Out cold.”

Canvas fell back into place. Boots retreated.

Aleric counted silently. Five seconds. Ten.

Only when the wagon’s rhythm settled again did he allow himself a deeper breath.

Running while bound was a joke.

The rope pulsed faintly with every shift of his weight, the enchantment threaded through it responding to his presence. Someone had spent real coin to keep him tied.

He didn’t actually need to cut it.

Another option surfaced—quieter, cleaner.

He could send the bindings away.

His magic dismissed things as easily as it summoned them. He’d never tried it on something in contact with his body. The System might not care. The ward might.

Still, it was a better gamble than dragging metal through metal in a warded wagon.

He waited. Listened. Counted breaths.

Nothing changed outside the canvas.

One chance.

He reached inward and touched the tether with the lightest pull.

Send these away.

The command was silent.

The air shifted. The ward hummed. The rope vibrated once.

Aleric didn’t breathe.

Then the bindings vanished in a soft pulse of displaced air, like something plucked straight through the world.

His arms dropped free.

He stayed still, listening for shouts or alarms.

Nothing.

Only the creak of wheels and the hiss of wind through canvas.

Good.

He rubbed his wrists as blood returned, biting back a groan.

Now he needed distance.

A clean escape would bring pursuit. Noise would buy him seconds.

He reached into the reservoir of American magic and called up something he knew by weight and shape alone.

A compact block settled against his stomach.

Dense. Stable.

A second object followed—a trigger device, preconfigured and simple.

Good. That I can work with.

Branches brushed the canvas. The forest thickened. The wagon dipped again.

Perfect.

Aleric slid toward the rear, moving with the sway so the boards never creaked, then dropped.

He hit hard. Rolled. Gravel tore his palms. Cold night air slapped his face.

He pressed the trigger.

Light. Sound. Horses screaming. Wood splintering.

Beautiful confusion.

Aleric was already gone, vanishing into the dark with one truth burning through him:

They had no idea what they'd just unleashed.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

CHAPTER 36

Gunnery Sergeant Howard stood at parade rest in front of Captain Yates' desk, spine straight, hands clasped behind his back. His face was carved from habit and irritation, but his eyes were alert, sharp. This was not bluster. This was a report.

"Sir," he began, voice steady, "I've already initiated standard response."

Yates leaned back slightly, pen paused over his paperwork. "Walk me through it, Gunny."

"Yes, sir. First thing I did was lock down the arms room. No sign-outs, no access, no movement. Inventory freeze. I personally supervised a full recount."

"And?"

"No discrepancies on paper," Howard said. "Serials match. Counts match. Logs are clean."

Yates frowned. "Clean how?"

Howard didn't hesitate. "Too clean. No missing entries. No late returns. No scratched corrections. Whoever signed last followed procedure to the letter."

That got a reaction. Yates set the pen down.

"Next," Howard continued, "I pulled key control. Every key accounted for. Chain of custody intact. No gaps."

"No forced entry?"

"None. Locks are pristine. Alarm system never tripped. Motion sensors show no movement inside the room during the window the pistols went missing."

Yates exhaled slowly. "Cameras?"

"Reviewed all existing footage in the surrounding corridors and access points. Nothing," Howard said. "No one enters. No one exits. No one carrying anything larger than a clipboard."

He shifted his weight slightly, then added, "I also re-interviewed the corporals on inventory. Same story, sir. Guns were present during count.

Gone during verification. Back on the rack less than an hour later."

"And fired," Yates said quietly.

"Yes, sir," Howard replied. "Recently fired. Powder residue confirmed. Slides warm when recovered."

The office was silent for a moment.

Finally, Yates spoke. "You're confident this isn't theft."

Howard's jaw tightened. "Sir, if this were theft, I'd already have a suspect in cuffs. This isn't theft. This is something else."

Yates studied him. He'd known Howard long enough to trust his instincts.

"What's your next step?" the captain asked.

Howard met his gaze. "Eyes on the racks, sir. Direct observation. Cameras inside the arms room. Focused on the weapon mounts themselves."

Yates nodded slowly. "Approved."

Howard inclined his head. "Already requested temporary equipment from base security. I wanted your authorization before installation."

"You have it," Yates said. Then, after a beat, "Gunny… off the record."

"Yes, sir?"

"If this happens again," Yates said carefully, "and you catch nothing human on that footage—"

Howard's expression didn't change, but his voice dropped a fraction. "Then we stop pretending this is a disciplinary issue."

Yates nodded once. "Proceed."

Howard turned crisply and headed for the door. As his hand closed around the knob, he paused.

"Sir," he said without turning, "whatever's touching my armory… it knows Marine procedure."

The door shut behind him, leaving Captain Yates staring at the empty space on his desk where two pistols had sat not long ago.

Captain Yates was halfway through a report he no longer cared about when the knock came again.

"Sir."

Howard didn't wait for permission this time. He stepped in, shut the door behind him, and set a flat, tablet-like device on the desk between them. It looked out of place amid the paper folders and metal in-trays, too sleek, too modern for the office's cluttered order.

Yates raised an eyebrow. "That was fast."

“Base security keeps mobile units for investigations,” Howard said. “I borrowed one. Cameras are already mounted. No blind spots. Racks, locks, tags. All of it.”

Yates leaned forward. “You ran it live?”

“Yes, sir. For the last twenty minutes.”

“And?”

Howard didn’t answer. He tapped the screen instead.

The display shifted to a stark, overhead view of the arms room. Fluorescent lights. Clean concrete. The long steel racks, each weapon slotted precisely, tags hanging in regulation order. The pistols sat side by side, exactly where they were supposed to be.

Time stamp ticked in the corner.

Nothing happened.

Yates felt his shoulders ease a fraction. “Gunny, if this is—”

“Sir,” Howard said quietly. “Please just watch.”

The time stamp advanced.

A corporal entered the frame briefly, crossed the room, checked a clipboard, and left. The door closed. The room was empty again.

Captain Yates was leaning forward now, elbows on the desk, eyes locked on the tablet. The frozen frame of the empty weapon slots still glared up at him.

“Run it again,” he said quietly. “From the moment they disappear.”

Howard rewound the footage. The arms room reset itself to order the pistols sat in their racks. The timestamp ticked forward.

Nothing.

Then the air in the room changed.

Not visibly at first. No shimmer, no distortion. Just… wrongness. The lights didn’t flicker, but the shadows beneath the racks deepened, pooling unnaturally.

Howard slowed the playback.

“Frame by frame,” Yates said.

Howard obliged.

Between one frame and the next, something *appeared*.

Not on the rack.

On the floor.

Coiled lengths of thick, dark rope lay where bare concrete had been moments before. Heavy. Rough. Fiber twisted tight, stained darker in places

as if soaked and dried again.

Yates stared. “What the hell is that?”

Howard zoomed in.

A coil of a dark rope that had obviously been used as a restraint.

“That wasn’t there before,” Howard said, though it sounded unnecessary.

“No one came in,” Yates said flatly.

“No alarms,” Howard confirmed. “No motion. No heat signature. No pressure change on the floor sensors.”

The camera feed continued.

The restraints lay still for several minutes, inert and ominous. Then—

Yates’ stomach turned. “Pause.”

Howard froze the frame.

Yates leaned back slowly. “That’s not equipment.”

“No, sir,” Howard said. His voice was very steady now. “That’s a person’s problem.”

The feed resumed.

Yates rubbed at his face, suddenly very tired. “Gunny… those restraints.”

“Yes, sir?”

“They weren’t designed for storage,” Yates said. “They were designed for use.”

Howard nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“And whatever put them there wasn’t trying to hide,” Yates continued. “It wanted them *seen*.”

Howard hesitated. “Sir… permission to speculate.”

“Denied.” Yates continued to speak. “Lock down that footage. Classify it above inventory discrepancy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Gunny?”

Howard straightened. “Sir?”

Yates didn’t hesitate.

“Alert NCIS.”

Howard’s posture didn’t change, but something settled behind his eyes. “Yes, sir.”

“Classify this as anomalous material intrusion,” Yates continued. “Full chain-of-custody. Video, physical evidence, sensor logs. I want everything preserved exactly as-is.”

“Yes, sir.”

Yates stood, pacing once behind his desk. “This stays need-to-know. No chatter. No theories. You brief NCIS when they arrive. I’ll notify regiment.”

Howard nodded once. “They’ll want the footage.”

“They’ll get it,” Yates said. “Authenticated, time-stamped, unedited.”

Howard paused at the door. “Sir… do you want me to pull the cameras?”

Yates shook his head. “No. Keep them running. If it happens again, I want it recorded.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Gunny?”

Howard turned.

“If NCIS asks whether we think this is human,” Yates said carefully, “your answer is simple.”

Howard didn’t blink. “We don’t know yet.”

Yates met his gaze. “Correct.”

Howard exited, already reaching for his secure line.

Yates remained standing in his office, staring at the paused frame on the tablet: bare concrete, empty air, and the knowledge that something had crossed into his command without asking permission.

NCIS would have questions.

And for once, the Marine Corps didn’t have answers.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

CHAPTER 37

Escape was survival. Survival meant distance. And he already had a head start.

Chaos erupted behind him as the blast tore the wagon apart. Horses screamed. Wagons cracked. Smoke rolled out across the night.

Aleric dove into the drainage ditch that lined the road. Mud and wet leaves slapped against his chest. He pressed himself low and still, letting the smoke and shouting mask the sound of his breath.

His ears rang. His ribs ached. His hands stung from the fall.

The wagon behind him burned hot and quick. Orange firelight flickered across the road. Shadows moved in frantic patterns as riders converged on the wreck.

Five riders. Maybe six.

Too many for a clean fight. Enough to find him if he left a trail.

A thin blue notification flickered at the edge of his vision. He ignored it. He would check it later.

“War has been declared,” he muttered under his breath. It was not a guess. It was a certainty.

He slid along the ditch until he was out of sight. Then he climbed out and crossed the road in a low crouch. He kept his head down and his steps light. The hard-packed soil would conceal most of his tracks.

He ran fifty paces down the far side, cut left into a thicket, and looped back toward the road. He crossed again.

False trails. Wide separation. Clean breaks.

Anything to stretch the distance and waste the pursuers’ time.

He moved until his lungs burned. He stopped only when he reached a narrow copse of trees that rose dark against the night sky. He scanned the branches and picked one with thick limbs and a tight canopy overhead.

Good cover. Good elevation. Good sightlines.

He climbed with slow, careful movements, testing each limb with his weight before committing. The bark scraped his palms, but the branches

held firm.

An old memory surfaced: a film he had watched as a kid. Men hunted across the frozen Yukon. One survivor moved through treetops to escape the dogs.

Aleric remembered the trick. Men rarely looked up during a chase.

He reached a branch high enough to hide him in the shadows and settled along it. His back pressed to the trunk. His breathing steady. His heartbeat slowing.

He pulled leaves over himself with one slow sweep of his hand.

From here, he could watch the road, listen to the riders, and plan his next move.

He waited—a Marine in hostile territory.

Al finally took the time to review his notifications.

[SYSTEM ALERT: FEUD EVENT TRIGGERED]

Aleric Tanim Status: *Head of Household, Crown-Appointed (Provisional)* Action Detected: *Lethal force used against abducting agents*

Result:

A Blood Feud has been recognized in your name.

The Household of Aleric Tanim is now in an active feud with the faction responsible for your abduction. The System has assigned feud markers to all identified participants.

Effects:

• Retaliation rights authorized • Counter-retaliation rights granted to the opposing faction • Political tensions elevated • Household risk tier increased • Matrons and Advocates notified • Fiancées alerted as primary stakeholders

Feud Boundaries Established:

• Personal harm may be answered with equal measure • Feud continues until repayment, surrender, negotiation, or death • Crown oversight active due to your provisional status

Note:

A Head of Household may invoke a feud through action, injury, or defense. Your engagement meets the criteria.

Aleric hung in the crook of the tree, the dawn wind cutting across his arms. The leaves hid him well enough, and the branches below muffled the movement of the riders still searching the road. He finally allowed himself a moment to breathe and flicked open the glowing tabs crowding his vision.

The System notifications filled the air with cold blue light.

He read each line twice.

When he reached the words *A Blood Feud has been recognized in your name*, he stopped, his jaw tightening.

“Great,” he muttered. “I start a feud before I even get married.”

He dismissed the window and pressed his back against the trunk. His breath fogged slightly in the cool morning air.

Below him, a rider shouted to another. They were spreading out and were angry. One slammed her spear against a tree and cursed the incompetence of their commander. Another complained loudly about losing her breakfast to the explosion.

And now he had a feud marker over his head that half the realm would see as a target.

He pulled his knees up and shifted deeper into the shadow of the canopy. The riders were moving west. They had not thought to check above them.

He focused on breathing slowly and steadily. He had to decide his next step before fatigue caught up to him.

Run north to civilization. Run south to lose himself. Circle back and try to ambush them. Head for the mountains. Or try another summon.

He lifted his hand slightly. The tremor in his fingers told him he needed rest, not heroics.

“One thing at a time,” he whispered.

Most of all, he needed to get ahead of the Pirate Queen’s plan. If she wanted him to ignite a war between the Triumvirate and Saxerwiemer, the worst thing he could do was run in either direction without thinking.

He scraped his thumb across a bit of bark, grounding himself.

The System chimed once more—a smaller alert.

Household risk tier increased.

“Yeah,” he said under his breath. “No kidding.”

Movement below drew his attention. A rider had stopped under his tree. She scanned the underbrush. Her horse snorted and shook its head.

Aleric tensed. He remained still. Not even a breath escaped him.

The rider leaned out of the saddle and studied the ground. Her eyes narrowed as she traced the faint outline of footprints. His footprints. The ones he had left before climbing the tree.

Dawn came slowly over the Barber Coast. A thin gray line pressed against the horizon. Cold air rolled across the deck of the Black Reef, leaving a faint salt sting in the lungs. The crew moved quietly in the half-

light. Men and women alike walked with the soft steps of sailors who knew their queen did not like noise before sunrise.

Marada Thorne stood alone on the quarterdeck.

The water was flat. The sky was pale. The ship rocked in a gentle rhythm that felt too still for her liking.

South Pennsylvania's coast stretched in the distance, hazy and blue. The northernmost reach of Triumvirate rule. Her spies had sailed these waters all night. Her small fleet waited behind a cluster of rocky shoals, hidden from the morning watchtowers.

It was twelve minutes after the hour of first bell when the System chimed.

A faint blue shimmer. A message formed in the air beside her.

Her jaw tightened before she even read it. Nothing good arrived at dawn.

She opened the notification.

SYSTEM NOTIFICATION

Feud Target Assigned

Primary origin of abduction order traced. Recipient of Blood Feud declaration: Marada Thorne, Sea Sovereign of the Barber Coast

Reason: Attempted abduction of Aleric Tanim with intent to provoke conflict between the Triumvirate and the Sea Lords of Saxerwiemer.

Your House is now engaged in active Blood Feud with the Household of Aleric Tanim.

Crown oversight active. Triumvirate informed. Feud rights unlocked.

The message dissolved into the morning haze.

Marada did not move. The light touched her coat, her braids, the thin silver ring on her thumb. The sea breathed beneath her boots.

Her first mate, Ysolde Grin, approached with slow steps.

"You are awake early," Ysolde said, her voice careful. "Is it the scouts or the currents?"

Marada lifted the hand that still tingled from the System message. "Neither."

Ysolde waited. The crew kept their distance. The sky shifted from gray to a faint peach. A flock of seabirds passed overhead.

Marada finally spoke.

"He escaped."

Ysolde frowned. "The foreign man?"

"Yes."

"Then we retrieve him again."

Marada turned her gaze toward the shore—the tall cliffs, the forests beyond, and the distant columns of smoke from Triumvirate villages.

“No,” she said. “The System traced it to me.”

Ysolde went still. “So the Triumvirate knows.”

“They know enough,” Marada replied.

She stepped to the rail and leaned on it with both hands. Her voice remained calm—too calm.

“He was supposed to cross the border into Saxerwiemer under our colors. They would blame the Sea Lords. The Triumvirate would respond. The coast would burn. The seas would choke with broken ships. And the Barber Coast would feast on trade routes for a generation.”

She looked at the horizon with a glare sharp as a blade.

“Instead, the boy triggered a feud. And the System delivered that truth directly into the hands of the Crown.”

Ysolde swallowed. “What is your command?”

Marada raised her chin. The sky brightened. The deck warmed slightly under the first rays of the rising sun.

“Find him,” she said. “Before the Court sends riders. Before Saxerwiemer hears rumors. Before his women get close enough to pull him back.”

She turned.

“And if you find the fool who let him slip free, toss her over the side.”

The crew scattered at once.

Marada watched the sunrise, her face unreadable.

The plan had been clean. The execution had been perfect. The spark had been placed with care.

But Aleric Tanim had refused to burn on command.

And now the Pirate Queen found herself facing a new set of problems.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

CHAPTER 38

He waited until the last rider disappeared into the brush, then let out the breath he had been holding. He sat up in the crook of the tree and wiped sweat from his brow. The explosion had bought him time, not safety.

It was time to arm himself.

“First a weapon,” he whispered.

He pictured an M4. The familiar weight, the profile, the shape of the carry handle.

Nothing happened.

His mana dipped slightly. The tree creaked beneath him.

He tried again, harder this time. He received the same result.

“No rifle,” he said. He rubbed a hand across his face. “Figures.”

Too large. Too complex. Too much metal. He shifted to the next idea.

He summoned a pistol instead. The M45A1 appeared in his grip with a soft compression of air. Tan frame, heavy slide, built for close work. It had been too large for his summoning before, but now it sat in his hand without trouble.

“Good enough.”

He checked the treeline again. All quiet. He focused on ammunition next. Three magazines arrived. Then a fourth. The weight of them pulled at his pockets.

His mana bar ticked down, though it held steady enough to continue.

He needed more than a pistol. He needed options.

He summoned the M203 launcher body. It appeared with a faint shimmer and settled across his lap. He set it aside and summoned the XM-frame standalone kit. The frame arrived compressed, meant to be opened later.

He continued quietly.

Four high explosive dual purpose rounds. Two high explosive rounds. Red smoke. Green smoke. Yellow smoke. One parachute illumination round.

His mana dropped sharply after that. He grunted as a wave of exhaustion washed over him.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Takes more out of me than it looks.”

He summoned one flash grenade. One fragmentation grenade. One smoke grenade.

He paused, breathing slow. The System’s quiet hum filled the back of his mind. His mana bar trembled at the halfway mark.

Armor next. He summoned a soft armor panel and slid it under his shirt.

The USMC harness arrived next, folded down tight. He clipped it to a branch beside him. The double forty millimeter pouches followed. Then his IFAK, compressed for transport. A hydration bladder, empty. An IR beacon that winked faintly before settling. Two chem sticks. A utility pouch. And one Claymore directional mine.

By the end of it, sweat ran down his spine and his vision blurred faintly. His mana bar scraped near the bottom.

He leaned back against the trunk.

“Now I know why I feel like hell,” he said.

Then he remembered.

He still had points to assign.

He opened his status screen. Twelve unspent points waited for him. The System pulsed softly, reminding him this was the moment to choose.

He breathed quietly as he looked over his stats. He ran two fingers across the floating numbers like he could feel their weight.

Strength. Constitution. Dexterity. Agility. Mind. Wisdom. Charisma. Luck.

He felt the soreness in his ribs. He felt the tightness in his legs. He felt the burn behind his eyes from lack of sleep.

“Not putting anything into charm,” he said. “I have enough trouble.”

He focused his thoughts. Three points went into Constitution. Three into Strength. Two into Agility. Two into Mind. Two into Wisdom.

The air pulsed once. His chest warmed. His limbs steadied.

His mana bar climbed halfway back up in a gentle rise.

His breathing came easier.

He flexed his hands and felt renewed power in his grip.

Below him the forest rustled. A rider shouted orders in the distance. They had spread too far to call back easily. They were frustrated. Angry. Tired.

Aleric holstered the pistol and began strapping gear to the harness in quiet, controlled movements.

“Now we hunt,” he whispered.

The Blood Feud burned behind his eyes like a warning. Someone had wanted him to spark a war.

They were about to learn what happened when a Marine was turned into a weapon without asking.

He climbed down the far side of the tree and vanished into the underbrush.

***

Captain Rilane kept her mare at a steady walk as she scanned the forest floor. The smoke from the ruined wagon still hung thick in the air behind them. Birds had stopped singing. The trees held a quiet that felt unnatural.

The foreign man had escaped. A prize. A liability.

And her Queen did not tolerate failure.

Rilane raised a closed fist. Her squad halted behind her.

“Check for heat prints,” she said. “He cannot have gone far.”

One rider dismounted and pressed a small rune-stone to the soil. Pale green light flickered and skated across the ground, picking out faint traces of energy.

“He crossed the road three times,” the woman said. “He knows how to lay a false trail.”

“Follow it,” Rilane ordered.

They pushed deeper into the woods. Low branches scraped their armor. The horses snorted at the smell of burned timbers behind them. The riders fanned out, trained for this kind of pursuit.

“He dropped from the wagon,” one said. “Look at this mark. A hard landing.”

“He will be limping.”

“He will be armed,” Rilane said. “Do not forget the bodies he left in the palace. Treat him as a hostile mage.”

Another rider knelt near a brushy patch of earth. “Tracks stop here. I cannot see where he went after.”

“He is not a mage,” Rilane snapped. “He is foreigner. A strange one, yes, but not a spellcaster.”

“Still dangerous.”

“More dangerous than the Queen?” Rilane said.

Her mare tossed its head. Something in the trees unsettled it. She stroked its neck and looked upward without moving her chin.

The canopy was thick. Plenty of dark pockets where a man could hide. Her mouth tightened.

“He could be above us.”

The others tensed and raised spears.

“If he is up there, flush him out,” Rilane said.

One rider drew a flare stick. Another loosened a coil of rope. A third pulled out a light wardstone, ready to sweep the branches.

Before they began, a faint metallic click echoed somewhere behind them. All heads snapped toward the sound.

“Movement,” one whispered.

“Spread,” Rilane ordered.

They circled outward, slow and careful. The forest pressed close. A faint breeze carried a pungent smell of a foreign chemical and wet earth.

“He could have doubled back.”

“He could be watching.”

“He could have set a trap.”

Rilane narrowed her eyes. “Keep your minds on him. He wants us scattered. He wants us blind. We stay sharp.”

They swept the area again. The faintest footprint appeared on a patch of dry soil. Barely more than a crease in the leaf litter.

“He went north,” the scout said.

“No,” Rilane replied. “He wants us to believe that.”

“How can you tell.”

Rilane leaned down and touched the mark with two fingers.

“Because this man fights like he was trained from birth. Everything he does is planned. Everything he does wastes our time. And if we push too far north, we get close to the patrol line. He wants that.”

She stood and signaled with two fingers.

“Fan south. He will head for shelter. He will look for water. He will dig in somewhere and wait.”

“And if he does not wait,” another rider asked.

Rilane looked toward the deeper woods where the shadows thickened.

“Then we drag him out by force.”

They moved in silence, unaware that the man they hunted had already slipped through their net and vanished into the dark.

***

The palace courtyard was a storm of noise and bodies. Guards sprinted across the paving stones. Messengers rushed in and out of doorways with sealed orders in hand. Horns sounded from the outer walls. The entire capital felt like it had been yanked awake by a giant hand.

Catrin pushed through the crowd with her sword in hand. Elowen Pryce followed close behind, holding up the hem of her ruined nightgown as she moved. Rhyosyn Vaughn kept pace beside them, her braid coming undone as she struggled to keep her heavy bookbag on one shoulder.

The moment they reached the outer gate, six lancers dropped their weapons to block the passage.

“Halt,” the captain barked. “No one leaves the palace grounds.”

Catrin glared. “We are going after Aleric.”

“You are not,” the captain said. “The city is under lockdown.”

Elowen stepped forward and tried to calm her voice. “We are his betrothed. The System marked us as stakeholders. We have rights.”

“Not during a crisis,” the captain said. “Orders came from the Crown Council. All noble houses must remain inside the walls until the threat is contained.”

“What threat,” Rhyosyn asked.

“A kidnapping,” the captain said. “A violent escape. And a Blood Feud recognized against an unknown foreign power. That is all we know.”

Catrin stepped closer until she was within arm’s reach of the guard. Her eyes were cold and steady.

“You know who he is,” she said. “You know what the System labeled him. He is not some stray man who wandered off. Someone took him. Someone hurt him. We have a duty to recover him.”

The captain swallowed. “I understand. But the gates stay closed.”

Elowen pulled out her House sigil. “House Pryce insists on passage. This is a matter of alliance.”

The captain shook her head. “No orders override the lockdown.”

Rhyosyn tried a different tactic. “We will join a patrol. We will not leave alone. Pair us with a guard company if you must.”

The reply came at once. “No patrol will escort you. If you die outside these walls the Crown will face a crisis it cannot contain.”

Catrin’s jaw tightened. “You think we will start a war by stepping outside.”

“We think a war already started,” the captain said.

A horn sounded again on the far wall.

Guards began shouting for new positions. A messenger ran up to the captain and whispered quickly in her ear.

The captain went pale.

She looked at the three women again.

“You are not permitted outside the walls,” she said. “This order comes from the Triumvirate.”

Catrin took a step back. The anger in her face did not fade. It sharpened.

They turned away from the gate and walked toward the inner courtyard. The city beyond the walls blazed with torchlight as soldiers braced for whatever danger they expected.

When they were out of earshot, Elowen stopped and clenched her hands.

“They fear the wrong thing,” she said.

“They fear losing control,” Rhyosyn said. “The System already announced the feud. The Court does not want us making it worse.”

“They will not let us out,” she said. “So we find another way.”

Elowen stared at her. “What do you mean.”

“This city has more exits than the front gate,” Catrin said. “Servant routes. Vault tunnels. Water channels. The Court knows only what the Court sees.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes widened. “You intend to sneak out.”

“We do not have a choice,” Catrin said. “He is out there somewhere. Hurt. Alone. And hunted. I will not let the Court keep us inside while he bleeds in the dirt.”

Elowen took a shaky breath but nodded.

Rhyosyn shifted her bookbag higher on her shoulder. “I have a map.”

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

CHAPTER 39

Aleric moved fast and quiet through the underbrush. He stayed low, using the slope of the land to mask his silhouette. He kept the sun at his back and the thicker pines between him and the searchers. He angled toward a low rise that offered a clean view of the trails below.

Good ground. High enough to watch. Low enough to hide. Perfect.

He crouched beneath a fallen log and waited for his breathing to settle. The forest stayed still. Only distant birds called. No hoofbeats yet. No shouts. His pursuers were close, but not close enough to see him set his trap.

He summoned the idea first. Not the blueprint. Not the parts. Just the concept.

Anti-personnel device, simple, pressure-triggered, built for channeling force in one direction. Something the System would interpret as a standard issue deterrent from his world.

A compact object settled into his palm. Inert. Safe. Recognizable only to him.

He summoned two more. The mana cost dragged at him, but his recent stat assignments kept him steady.

He placed the devices where the rise bent inward, creating a channel that would force riders into a natural funnel. He kept the placement simple. No hidden tripwires. No complex layers. Pure deterrence.

He was not trying to kill them, yet. Just stop the pursuit.

He stepped back and checked the angles. The forest floor sloped toward the funnel. The brush forced anyone following him into a narrow choke. Then he set up the claymore at the top of the funnel.

Good.

He backed up another twenty paces and climbed into the crook of an old oak. He settled behind a thick branch and drew the M45A1. He did not summon a suppressor. Better to conserve mana and keep options open.

He sat still and listened.

Voices carried faintly through the trees. Steel rattled. A horse snorted.

His jaw tightened.

They were coming.

The forest thinned just enough for sound to travel. Aleric heard the first rider long before she came into view. Her horse snorted and fought the reins. Metal clinked as she tried to steady it.

Another voice called from behind her. “Slow the pace. He crossed here. Fresh sign.”

Hoofbeats broke through the brush as the riders funneled into the narrow path he had chosen. The natural choke forced them into single file, and the undergrowth on either side was thick enough to block any attempt to circle wide.

The lead rider leaned forward in the saddle, scanning the ground with narrowed eyes. She raised her fist.

“Halt.” Her voice was low. Controlled.

The riders behind her stopped and shifted their weight. Horses stamped nervously. Birds scattered from the canopy above.

The lead rider swung down from her saddle. She crouched close to the earth and touched the faint scuffs in the soil. Her fingers traced the marks with slow precision.

“He was tired,” she said. “He favored one side. He kept cutting back. The trail is stronger here.”

Another rider leaned close. “You said he was laying false trails.”

“He was,” the scout replied. “But this is real. He came through here. Recently.”

She stood and brushed dirt from her gloves. Her eyes narrowed. “He was all over the place. Running hard. Stumbling. He gained ground but not much.”

Two more riders dismounted. They scanned the brush, each more tense than the last.

Rilane arrived behind them. She moved her mare forward, studying the tracks with a veteran’s eye.

“He is moving toward water,” Rilane said. “Or high ground.”

“Then why come through here,” one asked.

Rilane did not answer. Her gaze followed the choke point, the narrowing of the trail, the tilt of the earth.

Recognition flashed in her eyes.

“Pull back,” she said. “Now.”

She was two seconds too late.

A sharp blast tore through the funnel. Light flashed between the trees. Soil erupted upward in a violent spray. The lead rider flew backward and slammed into her horse, which screamed and bolted into the undergrowth.

Chaos rippled through the group. Horses reared. Riders dove for cover. One woman rolled down the slope shouting for a wardstone.

“Trap,” Rilane yelled. “He set a trap. Check for more.”

The riders scrambled, half crouched, weapons drawn. Their formation shattered. The funnel became a cage of broken branches and panicked animals.

Another rider called out, voice shaking. “Captain, that was not Triumvirate steel. That was foreign.”

Rilane clenched her jaw. “Focus. He wants us scattered.”

The scout pulled herself up, limping. Her cheek was streaked with dirt and shock.

“He was here,” she said. “But he is not far. He is watching us.”

Rilane scanned the treeline. No movement. No sound. Only thick shadow.

The riders were still shouting orders when Aleric reached the far edge of the ridge. The forest dipped into a shallow basin below him. The slope gave him cover. The trees broke the sight lines. It was good ground for a second strike.

He dropped to one knee behind a fallen trunk and unfastened the compact launcher from his harness. The weapon settled into his hands with a solid, familiar weight. He breathed once to steady himself.

The riders reformed along the funnel trail. They pressed forward in a staggered line, tense and angry. Rilane barked commands, trying to push them back into discipline.

They would not get another clean run at him.

Aleric thumbed one of the smoke rounds into place. He chose it because it would not kill them. It would blind the pursuit and buy distance. While he had no interest in body counts. He needed to send a message.

He lifted the barrel and aimed high, letting the gap in the branches frame the path below. His pulse slowed. His breath settled. The world narrowed to the line of trees and the cluster of riders moving through them.

They thought he was running.

Good.

He watched the shapes moving in the haze. One rider pushed ahead. She held a wardstone in her hand and tried to cut through the smoke. She was brave. She was disciplined. She was too far forward. Aleric thumbed one of the HE rounds into the launcher.

The message he wanted to send was simple:

I am not prey.

He braced the weapon against his shoulder. No hesitation. No guilt. No warning.

He fired.

The round struck the earth behind the lead rider. A flash tore the haze open. Heat rolled through the trees. Soil and splinters rained down.

The shockwave knocked the rider off her horse. The animal bolted, screaming into the woods.

The forest fell silent for one long breath. Then panic.

Rilane shouted at the top of her lungs. “Fall back. He is using foreign munitions. Full retreat.”

Another rider screamed in pain. A third would never scream again

.

They had expected a fugitive. They had not expected what one trained Marine could do with the right tools and the right fury.

Aleric reloaded with a smooth motion. He did not fire again.

One was enough. The point was made.

He watched the riders scramble to regroup.

Their confidence was gone. Their discipline wavered. Their captain fought to steady them and failed.

Good. Let them fear the trees. Let them doubt every shadow.

He lowered the launcher and whispered to himself.

“You hunt me again, you bleed again.”

He moved deeper into the forest. And the message he wanted sent was already racing back to whoever commanded these riders.

Not prey. Never prey.

Come for me again and I will burn your world.

Aleric moved until the sounds of pursuit faded. He stopped only when the forest grew thick enough to hide him completely. A fallen pine gave him a seat and a shield from sight. He took one slow breath, then another.

Only then did he pull up his notifications.

They came in a wave of cold light.

SYSTEM UPDATE Combat Resolved

Casualties attributed to your actions: • Three hostile humans • Two hostile mounts

Feud Status: A first victory has been recorded in your name. Your household has gained initial advantage in the Blood Feud.

Effects: • Confidence of enemy forces reduced • Recruitment cost for future sworn retainers reduced • Personal morale increased • Tactical rating adjusted

XP Gain 1150

Faction renown: 8

Additional Note: Lethal force within a recognized feud has no political penalty. You remain within the bounds of feud law.

Aleric stared at the panel. It felt strange. The System spoke as if he had won a tournament, not killed people. He closed his eyes for a moment.

He had fought before. He had lost men before. He knew what death meant.

But this world treated conflict like bookkeeping.

He exhaled once, slow and steady.

Three humans. Two horses. A first victory.

He did not feel victorious.

He felt awake.

He felt the distance growing between him and the man he had been in the palace.

“Fine,” he murmured. “If that is how this world keeps score.”

He closed the notification and stood. He checked the wind. He checked the light. He checked his direction.

His voice was low.

“This feud is not finished.”

He walked deeper into the woods, aware that every step now carried the weight of a new enemy who would not forget what he had done.

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Chapter Forty

CHAPTER 40

The Crown Palace still held the echo of the morning alarm. Servants whispered in every hallway. Guards doubled their patrols. No one had answers.

Catrin Arwen stood in the antechamber with her arms folded. She paced once, then twice, her boots striking sharp notes on the stone. Elowen Pryce leaned against a pillar, pale from shock. Rhyosyn Vaughn clutched her spellbook so tight her knuckles had gone white.

A pulse of cold light appeared in front of all three women at the same time.

The System had an update.

Catrin froze. Elowen gasped. Rhyosyn nearly dropped her book.

The panel unfolded in front of them.

SYSTEM UPDATE Feud Status Change

House: Tanim

Action Recorded: Hostile force engaged and defeated.

Casualties attributed to household head: • Three hostile humans • Two hostile mounts

Outcome: A first victory in the Blood Feud has been secured.

Feud Effects Updated: • Household prestige increased • Household survival rating adjusted • Enemy morale reduced • Crown observers notified • Fiancées assigned as primary supporters in conflict

The panel faded. Silence took its place.

Elowen spoke first. Her voice shook. “He killed them. He really killed them.”

Rhyosyn swallowed once, then pressed her fingers to her mouth. “They should not have taken him. They pushed him into a corner. What did they think he would do.”

Catrin lifted her chin. Her eyes were sharp and bright. “He warned them. He warned all of us. A man fights when he must. We knew he would defend himself.”

Elowen shook her head. “This makes everything worse. The Crown will panic. The Houses will panic. Whoever took him wanted this outcome.”

“No,” Catrin said. “Whoever took him wanted him frightened. They did not expect him to fight back.”

Rhyosyn nodded slowly. “Three dead. Two horses. He hit them hard enough to break their line.”

Elowen pressed a hand to her own chest as if steadying her heart. “He is alone. Injured. Outnumbered. And he is still winning.”

Catrin stepped forward and placed her hand on the table in front of them. “We go now. I do not care if the palace is locked down. I do not care if the streets are watched. He is fighting for his life. We will fight for him.”

Rhyosyn whispered a short spell and her braid tightened behind her shoulders. “I can track him if we reach the forest.”

Elowen straightened her dress and wiped her eyes. Her hands still trembled, but her voice steadied. “I will speak to the gate wardens. They will listen to House Pryce.”

Catrin nodded once. “The System has marked us as primary supporters. That gives us rights. And it gives us responsibility.”

Rhyosyn closed her spellbook with a soft thud. “Five dead. A first victory.”

Elowen looked between them. “Then we must reach him before the second.”

All three women turned toward the door at the same time.

United and more dangerous together than they had ever been apart.

***

The sun had barely crested the eastern horizon. A calm morning rolled across the Barber Coast. The pirate flagship *Sable Crown* drifted at anchor while her crew shifted through early tasks.

Inside the captain’s cabin, Marada Thorne sat before a polished oak table set with bread, fruit, and a cup of dark tea. Her long hair was braided tight. Her rings tapped the wood in a slow rhythm while she read a courier’s night report.

She did not look up when her first mate entered.

“Storm watch is clear,” the woman said. “Patrols caught sight of two Triumvirate cutters to the north. Nothing unusual.”

“Good,” Marada answered. “Let them look. They will see nothing.”

She lifted a slice of orange to her mouth.

A pale shimmer unfolded in the air above her breakfast plate.

A System panel.

Marada’s hand stopped mid-motion. Her eyes sharpened.

The first mate froze in place.

Marada read the notification in silence.

SYSTEM UPDATE Blood Feud Recognized

House: Tanim Status: First victory recorded Casualties by household head: • Three hostile humans • Two mounts

Origin of feud: Your agents identified as responsible for abduction attempt. Feud now active between House Tanim and House Thorne.

Feud Effects: • Retaliation rights balanced • Crown observation elevated • Political exposure increased • Feud markers applied to involved parties

Reminder: Feud remains active until repayment, surrender, negotiation, or death.

The panel faded.

The room stayed still.

Marada set the orange slice down with exact precision. Her jaw tightened. She drew a slow breath and released it through her nose.

“He is alive,” she said.

The first mate nodded carefully. “So it seems.”

“He escaped the wagon. He struck back. Three dead already.” Marada’s voice held no fear. Only calculation.

“This was not expected,” the first mate said.

“No,” Marada replied. “He was supposed to remain frightened. He was supposed to be carried across the border and left where the Sea Lords would be blamed. A clean spark for a clean fire.”

The first mate hesitated. “Do we abort.”

“No.” Marada reached for her tea. “We adjust.”

She took a sip and set the cup down with a soft click.

“He has revealed something important. He is not a passive prize. He is a fighter. This complicates the plan, but it also confirms his value.”

“Value, Captain.”

“Yes.” She leaned back and looked toward the cabin window, where the sea shimmered in faint gold. “A man who survives an abduction and kills

three of my trained riders alone is dangerous. The Triumvirate will see it now. The Sea Lords will see it later."

"Do we pursue him."

"We do nothing that looks like pursuit. The Crown will be watching. The feuding law binds our hands in daylight." She smiled faintly. "But night has no witnesses."

She stood and walked to the map pinned against the wall. Her finger traced the coastline, then the inland forests near the border.

The first mate shifted uneasily. "Captain, he may reach the fiancées. Or worse, he may reach the border."

Marada tapped the map once.

"If he reaches the fiancées, they will scream for war. Every direction he runs does my work for me."

The first mate spoke in a low voice. "And if he chooses to run toward us."

Marada smiled without warmth.

"Then the real game begins."

***

Rowena Stanton was bent low beneath the trees, knife in hand, brushing away leaf litter with practiced care. The forest floor here was dark and rich, damp with rot and life. Perfect ground for truffles. Her House's quiet specialty. Rare. Valuable. Easy to lose if you were careless.

She straightened slowly as heat washed across the clearing.

It was not natural heat. Not sun or summer. This was sharp, sudden, violent.

Rowena looked up just in time to see a gout of flame tear upward through the predawn canopy several valleys away. It bloomed bright and brief against the pale sky, then vanished as if swallowed by the world.

Her heart skipped.

"That was not lightning," she said.

Her sisters froze. Joan, the next youngest, had already dropped her basket. Ellyn stood rigid, one hand on the short spear she carried more from habit than need.

"Signal fire?" Joan asked, though her voice carried no confidence.

"No," Rowena replied. "Too bright. Too fast."

They waited. The forest held its breath.

Then came the sound.

A rolling crack, deep and concussive, like thunder dragged screaming across stone. It echoed once, twice, then again, each report closer than the last. Birds erupted from the trees in panicked clouds.

Joan grabbed Rowena’s sleeve. “Lady. There is smoke.”

Rowena followed her pointing finger.

Color bled through the forest where no color should exist. Thick plumes of green and red smoke rose beneath the canopy, staining the morning air like spilled paint. It rolled low and heavy, clinging to trunks and branches, unnatural and unmistakable.

Rowena’s stomach tightened.

“That is not mage smoke,” she said. “And not any alchemy I know.”

They had barely begun to back away when the ground itself seemed to punch upward.

The explosion came without warning. Earth leapt. Leaves and soil blasted skyward in a violent spray. The shockwave slapped through the forest hard enough to thrum across their bodies.

Rowena braced as the air rang and the world shook.

Silence followed. Thick. Unnatural.

Rowena drew a slow breath and tasted ash.

“This is no hunting accident,” she said quietly.

Joan’s eyes were wide. “Is it war?”

Rowena did not answer right away. Her gaze fixed on the rising smoke, on the shattered trees, on the echo that still rang in her bones.

“I don't know…” she said as she though then spoke at last. “It is something worse.”

She straightened, every trace of truffle gathering forgotten.

“Gather the baskets. Leave them if you must. We return to the hold now.”

Ellyn swallowed. “Should we send riders.”

Rowena nodded once. “Yes. And a messenger to the nearest patrol. Whatever is happening in our woods is not meant for us.”

She hesitated, then added, softer, “And pray whoever caused this is running, not hunting.”

Behind them, the smoke continued to rise, marking the forest like a wound that refused to close.

Rowena Stanton slowed as the forest changed.

The birds had gone silent again, not the panicked silence of flight, but the careful quiet that followed a disturbance. Leaves lay torn and scattered. Bark was scorched in places, not burned through, but marked as if by heat and force both.

She lifted a hand.

“Stop,” she whispered.

Joan froze mid-step. Ellyn shifted her grip on her spear.

They were not alone.

Aleric heard them before he saw them.

Light footfalls. Controlled breathing. Three people, maybe more. Not mounted. Not crashing through brush like soldiers. He slid a step higher along the trunk he had chosen earlier, settling into shadow. The pistol came up in his hand, steady, quiet.

He focused.

No feud markers.

He checked again, slower this time. Nothing flared at the edge of his vision. No hostile designation. No system warning.

That stayed his finger.

He tracked the lead figure through the branches. Woman. Tall. Moving like someone who knew the woods. Not a court lady. Not a hunter either. Something in between.

Rowena felt it then. The weight of being watched.

She did not draw her blade.

“Whoever you are,” she said, voice firm but not loud, “we are not your enemy.”

The words hung in the air.

Aleric shifted just enough that the leaves rustled.

Three heads snapped up.

Joan gasped. Ellyn raised her spear halfway before Rowena caught her wrist.

“Easy,” Rowena said. “If he wanted us dead, we would not be speaking.”

Aleric considered that. It was true.

He stepped out from behind the tree, slow and deliberate, pistol angled down but visible. Mud streaked his trousers. His face was drawn tight with exhaustion, eyes sharp and alert.

“Turn around,” he said quietly. “All of you. Slowly.”

They did.

Rowena obeyed without protest. Joan’s hands trembled. Ellyn’s jaw clenched, but she complied.

“Now step back,” Aleric said. “Five paces.”

They did.

Only then did he lower the pistol another inch.

“You’re on Stanton land,” Rowena said, careful now. “This forest answers to my House.”

Aleric nodded once. “Didn’t know that. Wasn’t aiming to trespass.”

Joan swallowed. “You’re the one. The fire. The thunder.”

“Yes,” he said. No pride. No apology.

Rowena turned slowly to face him again. She studied him openly now. The foreign cut of his gear. The way he held himself. The weapon that did not belong to this world.

“You are wounded,” she said.

“Functional,” Aleric replied.

Ellyn frowned, eyes flicking from his face to the weapon in his hand and back again. Then her gaze dropped, sharpened, and snapped back up.

“Wait,” she said. “He’s a man.”

The word landed heavy in the forest.

Joan sucked in a breath. “What is a man doing in our woods.”

Aleric did not react. He had learned already that flinching only made it worse.

“The patrols are moving,” Ellyn continued, forcing herself back to the problem at hand. “Riders. Armed.”

“I know,” he said. “They’re not yours.”

Rowena met his eyes. Something passed between them. Recognition, not of rank, but of danger. And calculation.

“You are being hunted,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And you brought that hunt into my forest.”

“I didn’t choose the ground,” Aleric said. “I chose not to die in it.”

Rowena studied him again, this time more carefully. Not as a curiosity. As a liability.

“My name is Rowena Stanton,” she said at last. “These are my sisters. Whatever feud you’re part of, it is not ours.”

Aleric inclined his head slightly. “Aleric Tanim.”

The name meant nothing to Joan. Everything to Rowena.

Her breath caught, just a little.

“I have read of you,” she said. “A broadsheet from the capital. A foreign man taken into the Crown’s keeping. Seven marriages decreed. Half the court scandalized, the other half furious.”

Aleric did not deny it. He had learned quickly that denial only made people curious.

“The Crown’s man,” Rowena said.

“One of them,” he answered.

Silence settled again. Distant, faint, the sound of riders carried through the trees.

Rowena made her decision.

“You cannot stay here,” she said. “A man in Stanton woods during a hunt invites questions I do not want answered.”

She paused, then added, “But I can keep you from being found. For a time.”

Aleric searched her face. He weighed risk, intent, posture. He saw no hunger, no fear, no greed.

Only calculation.

“Why help me,” he asked.

Rowena’s mouth tightened. “Because something violent has entered my land, and I will decide how it leaves.”

She glanced toward the drifting smoke, then back at him.

“And because men written about in broadsheets rarely stop being trouble just because they wish to.”

Aleric nodded once.

“Then lead,” he said.

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Chapter Forty-One

CHAPTER 41

Al had noticed Rowena and her sisters examining him, their glances passing back and forth like a quiet debate.

“What?” he demanded at last.

“You are like no other man we have seen,” said one of the younger women. She looked like a softer echo of Rowena, same eyes, fewer hard lines.

“I don’t imagine you’ve seen many men in your life,” Al said.

“I have seen five,” she replied, chin lifting. “Our father. Our brother. An uncle. And his two sons.”

The others murmured agreement.

“Five men,” Al said slowly, doing the math in his head. “In what—fifteen, sixteen years?”

Rowena stepped in before the girl could bristle. “For country gentry, that is a significant number. Most households are reluctant to parade men about. And finding you here, unclaimed, in our woods…” She let the sentence trail off. The implication was clear.

Al sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “So what happened? What broke your world so badly there are so few men?”

The women stilled.

“Where I come from,” he went on, “population’s about even. Half men. Half women. Always has been.”

One of the girls gasped outright, hand flying to her mouth.

“That’s impossible,” another whispered.

Rowena studied him with new intensity. “No war could leave such balance.”

“It wasn’t war,” Al said. “Not one war. Not even a hundred. Men just… survive. Same as women. We don’t disappear.”

Silence settled, thick and uneasy.

“At birth,” the younger one said carefully, “we expect one boy for every fifteen, sometimes twenty girls. When a son is born, the house feasts. When

a daughter is born…” She shrugged. “Life continues.”

Al felt something cold settle in his chest. “And you don’t think that’s wrong?”

Rowena didn’t answer right away. When she did, her voice was level. “We think it is *how the world is*.”

He looked at them then—really looked—and understood the weight behind their curiosity. To them, he wasn’t just strange.

He was proof that their world might be wounded.

Al shook his head. “Point me toward civilization and I’ll be out of your hair.”

The women stared at him as if he had suggested walking into the sea.

“What do you mean?” one of the younger sisters said. “We can’t allow you to go unescorted. That would be…”

“Uncivilized,” Rowena finished, her tone firm.

Al let out a short breath. “Look, I’ve already got three fiancées I didn’t ask for. I can take care of myself, and I don’t want to drag your family into my mess.”

That landed poorly.

The younger women bristled at once. One crossed her arms. “You speak as though escort is a burden.”

“It’s a responsibility,” another said. “And one we cannot abandon.”

Rowena studied him in silence, then said, “You don’t understand what you’re asking.”

“Then explain it,” Al replied.

“If you walk alone,” she said, “every house that learns of you will assume you are unclaimed. Unprotected. Fair taking. That does not end with harsh words.”

“And if you leave our lands without escort,” one sister added, quieter now, “it reflects on us. As though we failed to guard what was placed before us.”

Al frowned. “Placed by who?”

“The world,” Rowena said. “Or the Crown. Or the gods, depending on who you ask.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Where I come from, a man doesn’t need permission to walk down a road.”

Rowena’s gaze softened, just a fraction. “Here, a man who walks alone is either mad, already dead, or about to belong to someone else.”

That finally gave him pause. "I can take care of myself as the last ones who thought they could walk off with me found out."

“You think you’re being kind,” she continued. “Trying not to involve us. But abandoning you would be cruelty, not mercy.”

The younger sisters nodded, some with unease, some with something closer to resolve.

Rowena met his eyes. “Until you stand before law or hearth and are accounted for, you are our responsibility. Whether you like it or not.”

Al exhaled slowly. “Back home, that’s what we’d call being voluntold.”

Rowena almost smiled.

“Then consider yourself,” she said, “very politely claimed.”

***

The wagon lay where it had died, half-slumped in a shallow ravine just off the old road.

They found it at dusk.

Charred timbers still smoked faintly, the iron rims of the wheels warped and blackened. One axle had snapped clean through, the break jagged and violent. Whatever had struck it had done so with purpose.

Lady Pryce dismounted first, her expression hard as she surveyed the wreckage.

Rhyosyn knelt beside the ruts, fingers hovering just above the ash. A flicker of magic danced across her knuckles as she tasted the air. “Fire, but not wild flame. Focused. Controlled.” She looked up sharply.

Catrin said nothing. She crouched near the trail, eyes tracing the ground with a hunter’s patience. After a moment she reached out and turned over a shard of splintered wood. Embedded in it was a deep gouge—metal, heavy, blunt force.

“it looks like he fought,” she said simply.

That drew their attention.

Nearby, the earth told the rest of the story. Drag marks where bodies had been pulled aside. Boot prints—wrong for local levies, too even, too disciplined. And then, unmistakable once you knew what to look for, a single set of deeper impressions cutting away from the wreck.

She continued to examine the ground. “One man,” Catrin said. “On foot. Moving fast.”

Pryce’s jaw tightened. “He did this!”

Rhyosyn rose, eyes alight.

They followed the to the side of the road. At first it was faint—scuffed leaves, broken twigs—but it grew clearer the farther they went. Here, a snapped branch at shoulder height. There, a smear of blood hastily wiped from bark. And always those same strides, long and steady, never panicked.

Pryce muttered. “Even hunted, he moves like a soldier.”

Catrin nodded. “And he knows he’s being followed.”

Rhyosyn paused, head tilting. “Then why leave a trail at all?”

They shared a look, Pryce was the first to reply.

“Because,” Pryce said slowly, “he wants to be found.”

The forest closed in around them as the light faded. Somewhere ahead, a crow took wing, startled.

Catrin drew her sword, the sound soft but final. “We track him through the night.”

Rhyosyn smiled thinly. “Good. I’d hate for him to think we gave up.”

They found the scar in the woods just as night finished closing its fist around the trees.

Rhyosyn lifted her staff and whispered a word of power. Light blossomed outward, pale and steady, pushing back the dark.

What it revealed made them all still.

The ground ahead was torn open—a fresh hell gouged into the forest floor. Earth had been blasted outward in a wide divot, the soil blackened and glassy in places. Rotting blood smeared the surrounding trees in dark arcs and spatters, thick and foul-smelling even at a distance. Bark had been stripped away in long scars, as though something had clawed through the forest itself.

Pryce swallowed. “What in the saints—”

“Corrupted blood,” Rhyosyn said quietly, stepping closer but no farther. Her magic hummed, uneasy. “Human.”

Catrin crouched at the edge of the blast zone, eyes sharp, cataloging details. Boot prints—Al’s, unmistakable—led into the clearing and then vanished amid the churned earth.

“A fight,” she said. “And not a small one.”

Rhyosyn glanced deeper into the shadows beyond the light’s reach. “Should we search further?”

Catrin didn’t answer immediately as she crouched and examined the area. "Do you smell that?" She asked as her eyes scanned the underbrush,"sulpher maybe?" The other ladies sniffed the air but didn't seem to detect anything.

She rose slowly and pointed, not toward the main crater, but to its edges. Smaller divots peppered the ground in a loose arc—shallow, violent impacts that bit into soil and stone alike. Some were half-hidden beneath leaves, others burned clean down to clay.

“No,” Catrin said at last. “Look there.”

The others followed her gaze.

Pryce’s breath caught. “Those weren’t misses?”

“No,” Catrin stated. “They were warnings. look at the gore.”

Rhyosyn’s light dimmed slightly as her expression tightened. “He did something here.”

Catrin said. “Something American.”

Hand tightening on her sword. “Whatever he fought… he didn’t just survive it. He changed the ground.”

The forest seemed to lean inward, branches creaking softly, as though listening.

“This place isn’t safe,” Catrin continued. “Not for us. Not tonight.”

Rhyosyn hesitated. “But if we turn back—”

“We don’t,” Catrin said. “We go around.” She said as she bent down and picked up a heavy branch then heaved it across the clearing.

Pryce nodded slowly. “Because if he caused this—”

“—just how?” Catrin finished.

Rhyosyn extinguished the light with a sharp gesture. Darkness rushed back in, thick and heavy.

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Chapter Forty-Two

CHAPTER 42

"Damn that man."

Ysanne Caldrith struck the arm of her chair with the flat of her palm. The sound cracked through the council chamber like a gavel blow. She had always *thought* of herself as the head of the Triumvirate, and in moments like this, she behaved as though the thought alone made it true.

"Which man?" Elowen Virex replied mildly, folding her hands atop the table of sealstone. "There are enough damnable ones in the realm to choose from."

Sereth Maelor did not speak. She never rushed to. Unlike the other two, she did not *need* to announce authority. She was the Veil—the keeper of belief, of fear, of meaning. If the Crown had a heart, it beat where she sat.

"That Tanim," Ysanne snapped. "A feud—*not even properly married*—and already he is in a feud!"

Elowen's mouth twitched. "To be precise, Matron, the feud was declared *against* him."

Sereth exhaled softly, as though weary. "And hardly by his hand. Whoever they were came at night. They kidnapped him. They killed Crown guards. Then they attempted to flee."

She turned her gaze, slow and penetrating, toward Ysanne.

"If he had not survived," Sereth continued, "we would not be having this conversation."

Ysanne's fingers tightened. "Survival does not excuse consequence."

"Nor does it assign guilt," Elowen said evenly. "Do we even know how the feud was accomplished?"

"No," Elowen answered her own question before Ysanne could. "We do not."

She lifted a slate etched with sigils. "What we know is this: we have been tasked with monitoring a feud between a single unblooded man and an entity of considerable means."

Ysanne scoffed. "Which makes him *even more* damnable."

Before Sereth could respond, the air itself tightened.

Light unfolded in the chamber—not flame, not spell, but something colder and more precise. Words formed in clean, uncompromising script, hovering before them.

SYSTEM UPDATE

Feud Status Change

House: Tanim

Action Recorded: Hostile force engaged and defeated.

Casualties attributed to household head: • Three hostile humans • Two hostile mounts

Outcome: A first victory in the Blood Feud has been secured.

Feud Effects Updated: Fiancées assigned as primary supporters in conflict.

The words faded.

Silence followed.

Ysanne stared at the empty space where the notice had been, her face pale with restrained fury.

Elowen closed her eyes once. “That was… fast.”

Sereth’s lips curved—not into a smile, but something close enough to be mistaken for one.

“Oh my,” she murmured, a gleam of something sharp and delighted flickering in her eyes. “It seems the System has decided.”

She leaned back, folding her hands.

“The man is not merely a problem,” Sereth said softly. “He is a *story* now.”

Ysanne’s voice was tight. “Then we must control how it ends.”

Sereth inclined her head. “Or decide who survives it.”

The Crown chamber fell quiet once more, but this time the silence carried weight.

Somewhere far away, a man who had never asked for any of this took another step into legend—whether he wished to or not.

***

Al found himself seated at a low table in the main hall, the fire burning steady and warm at his back. The house smelled of bread and herbs and

something slow-simmered—comforting in a way he hadn’t realized he’d been craving.

Across from him sat Rowena’s father, broad-shouldered but soft-handed, his sleeves rolled as he carefully trimmed vegetables into a neat wooden bowl. To his right, the younger son—barely past his fifteenth year—sat cross-legged on a bench, mending a torn sleeve with careful, practiced stitches.

This, Al realized, was *men’s space* here.

“So,” the father said after a moment, glancing up with a polite, almost shy smile, “do you cook?”

Al blinked. “Yeah. I mean—nothing fancy. Eggs, stews, whatever fits in a pot.”

The man nodded approvingly. “Good. A man who can feed himself is never useless.”

The boy looked up, eyes bright. “My mother says I’ll need to learn better baking before winter. Wives don’t like burnt bread.”

Al coughed once, trying not to laugh. “Smart mother.”

The boy grinned, unabashed. “I’ll meet them in a few months. Three, I think. Maybe four. They’re from the south holdings.”

“That so?” Al said carefully.

“Yes!” The boy’s needle paused mid-stitch. “They say one is very good with numbers. Another sings. I hope they like children.” He said it with the earnest confidence of someone who had never been allowed to doubt his future. “Father says I’ll be busy.”

The father chuckled softly. “Busy is good. Busy means you’re wanted.”

Al let the silence stretch, the fire popping quietly. Wanted. The word sat heavy in his chest.

“And you?” the father asked gently. “You will have wives soon as well, won’t you?”

Al’s jaw tightened for just a second before he smoothed it away. “Looks that way.”

The man studied him with quiet sympathy. “It’s… different, for you.”

“Yeah,” Al said. “That’s one word for it.”

The boy tilted his head. “Are you nervous?”

Al considered lying. Then decided against it. “I’m trying to figure out who I’m allowed to be.”

Neither of them laughed at that.

The father set the bowl aside and wiped his hands on a cloth. “That takes time,” he said. “Even here.”

Al nodded, staring into the fire.

For the first time since arriving in this world, he understood something clearly and without illusion:

This place did not see men as weak.

It saw them as *domestic*.

And somehow, that frightened him more than chains ever had.

***

Al heard them before he saw them.

Footsteps—quick, purposeful, too many for comfort—crossed the yard outside, followed by low, urgent voices that cut off the moment the door opened. The warmth of the hall thinned as the women entered, bringing with them the sharp edge of anxiety.

The first through the door, had her hair pinned hastily, cloak half-fastened as if she’d left something unfinished to get here. She looked like an older version of Rowena. Two other women followed—by the look of them, faces drawn tight with worry rather than anger.

The room changed.

The father rose at once, setting aside his cloth. The younger son stood as well, suddenly unsure what to do with his hands.

“Sit,” Rowena’s mother said, not unkindly, but firmly. Her eyes flicked to Al, then away again, as though looking at him too long might itself be a risk. “All of you.”

They obeyed.

The women gathered near the hearth, close enough to speak in hushed tones but far enough that Al could hear every word anyway. No one had taught them to whisper *around* men. Why would they?

“This is a mistake,” one of the ladies murmured. “Having him here. If the Court hears—”

“They will hear,” another snapped softly. “Everything hears now.”

Rowena’s mother pressed her fingers to her temple. “You know what they will say. That we sought to influence him. That we—” She swallowed. “That we tempted him. Or coerced him. Or worse.”

The word *worse* hung in the air, heavy and undefined.

Al shifted in his seat. “For what it’s worth,” he said carefully, “nobody’s done anything to me.”

Every woman in the room turned toward him at once.

That, apparently, was the wrong thing to say.

“You must not say that,” one of the matrons said sharply. “Not aloud. Not to anyone.”

“I—” Al stopped, re calibrated. “I’m saying I’m here by choice.”

Rowena’s mother closed her eyes for a brief moment, then opened them again, calmer but no less tense. “You don’t understand,” she said. “Choice is not what matters.”

She stepped closer, finally meeting his gaze. There was fear there—not of him, but of what he represented.

“If it is believed we sought your favor,” she continued, “or tried to bind you in any way, the charge will not be impropriety. It will be corruption. Treason by influence.”

The father cleared his throat. “He’s been nothing but respectful.”

“That will not save us,” another matron replied. “Men do not need to act for accusations to grow.”

Al leaned back slowly, the pieces clicking into place. “So just being in the same room as me is dangerous.”

“Yes,” She said simply. “For you. For us. For our daughters.”

The younger son looked between them, confusion written plain on his face. “But he hasn’t done anything wrong.”

One of the women reached out and touched his shoulder, gentler now. “That has never been the point.”

Silence fell again, thick and uncomfortable.

At last, Rowena’s mother straightened, her expression settling into something resigned and brittle. “We cannot keep him here long. Not tonight, if it can be helped. The Court will already be watching for missteps.”

The women exchanged looks—fear, calculation, reluctant resolve passing between them in silence.

Then the sound came.

A heavy, deliberate **booming** against the palisade gate, wood shuddering under the force of it. Not a knock. A demand.

Al closed his eyes and rubbed a hand over his face. “And of course,” he muttered.

He didn’t need to look toward the door. He already knew who it was.

His fiancées. At the absolute worst possible moment.

“You might as well let them in,” he sighed. “I don’t think pretending I’m not here is going to work.”

Rowena’s mother stiffened. “How do you know it’s them?”

Al’s mouth twitched humorlessly. “Because nobody else in this world hits doors like they’re arguing with them.”

Another strike echoed through the yard, louder this time. Somewhere outside, voices rose—sharp, authoritative, impatient.

The younger son’s eyes widened. “Are we in trouble?”

“No,” Rowena’s mother said quickly, though her gaze flicked toward Al. “Not yet.”

Al stood, straightening his jacket out of old habit. “Look,” he said quietly, “whatever they think I’m doing here, I’m not. I don’t want your family dragged into this any more than you do.”

“That may not be your choice,” one of the matrons said softly.

“I know,” Al replied. “But I can at least not make it worse.”

Another booming rattled the gate. A voice carried over the palisade now—clear, sharp, unmistakably noble.

“Open the gate in the name of the Crown!”

Rowena’s mother closed her eyes for a heartbeat, then nodded once. “Very well.”

She turned to Al. “Stand where we can see you. Say nothing unless spoken to. Let *us* handle this.”

Al raised both hands slightly in surrender. “Been doing that all day.” his words sounding irritated.

As the household moved toward the yard, the tension coiled tight and ready to snap, Al couldn’t help thinking that battles were simpler.

At least in a firefight, you knew where the enemy was.

The gate creaked open, torchlight spilling inward—and with it, the beginning of yet another reckoning.

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Chapter Forty-Three

CHAPTER 43

Surprisingly, Al's fiancées were **not** at the gate.

Instead, five armed women stood in the torchlight—helmets on, mail half-fastened, weapons already in hand. Their posture was rigid with purpose, the kind that came from orders given *without room for interpretation*. They looked less like escorts and more like collectors.

One of the matrons stiffened beside Al. "These are your fiancées?" she asked quietly, disbelief edging her voice as the household women manning the gate retreated, eyes downcast.

"I've never seen these women in my life," Al said flatly.

That answer drew a sharp inhale from more than one throat.

The woman at the front stepped forward, her spear haft striking the ground once in emphasis. "You are to surrender the man in the name of the Queen."

The words landed like a dropped blade.

Around them, the household began to peel away—slowly, carefully. Not cowardice. Prudence. Every woman there understood exactly what a wrong move would cost them.

Al exhaled through his nose. "I'm really not in the mood for this."

The leader's eyes hardened. "Surrender yourself," she ordered. "These women will not stand for you."

He felt it then—the subtle shift as the last of the family stepped aside. All except one.

He caught the whisper, sharp and furious, just behind him.

"I promised him we would get him out of our lands," Rowena hissed at her mother. "He would have been further from our door, further from the laws—"

"Hush," her mother snapped softly, fear threading her voice. "Now."

Al heard their footsteps retreat into the house. Not abandonment. Retreat. He understood the distinction well enough.

This is my fight, he thought. *Not theirs.*

He sighed once, long and weary, and reached out.

The pistol settled into his hand, solid and familiar, the weight grounding him. The women at the gate froze—not at the weapon itself, but at the way it appeared, seamless and wrong.

“What sorcery—” the leader began.

Al didn’t let her finish.

The shots cracked through the night—sharp, controlled, terrifyingly precise. The first woman went down before she could raise her shield, a neat bloom of red spreading across her chest. The second staggered back, screaming, spear clattering from her hands.

The remaining three reacted at last—one diving for cover, another charging, the third raising her weapon too late.

Al moved on instinct, not anger.

Two more shots. One body fell. Another collapsed against the palisade, sliding down with a wet sound. The last woman turned to run.

He didn’t chase her.

The silence afterward was worse than the gunfire—thick, ringing, unreal. Smoke curled faintly in the torchlight. The smell of burnt powder mingled with blood and pine.

Al lowered the pistol slowly, heart hammering but hands steady.

From inside the house, someone sobbed.

From the shadows beyond the gate, the survivor fled into the night—carrying with her a message no herald could have delivered faster.

Al looked on another notification as the feud claimed more victims.

***

Arrigel stumbled into the ring of light, her legs burning, lungs rasping like torn bellows. The low, steady glow of the spell cast ahead of the riders painted the road and hedges in pale blue, just bright enough to see faces—and the expressions she found there made her blood chill.

“I have found him,” she called, forcing the words out between breaths. “There is a farmstead about five miles that way—” She thrust an arm back in the direction she’d fled from, fingers shaking. “He’s there. He—”

She faltered.

No one interrupted her. No one asked for clarification. No one demanded how many guards remained, or why she was alone.

The riders had drawn up in a loose line, reins held steady, mounts snorting softly in the night air. The woman at their center sat tall in the saddle, armor dark and unadorned, helm tucked under one arm. Her eyes were fixed on Arrigel—not curious, not startled.

Hard.

Arrigel's mouth went dry. "He has… strange magic," she said, quieter now. "It kills at a distance. I saw it. He slew the others in heartbeats."

Still nothing.

The lead woman finally spoke, her voice calm in a way that felt practiced. "You ran."

"Yes," Arrigel said defensively. "I was ordered to report."

"That was wise," the woman replied. "You did as you were trained."

Relief flickered—brief, fragile.

Then the woman leaned forward slightly. "Did he see you leave?"

Arrigel hesitated. "I—I don't think so."

The woman nodded once, as if confirming something already decided. She glanced to her left, then her right. Subtle signals passed between the riders—hands tightening on reins, a shift of posture, mounts turned without a word.

"Good," the leader said. "Then you will ride with us."

Arrigel frowned. "I… I can't keep up on foot."

"You won't be on foot," the woman said. "You will ride behind me."

Something in her tone made Arrigel's skin prickle. She stepped closer, eyes flicking from face to face. "Shouldn't we send word back to the Court? Or—"

"We are the word," the woman cut in.

The spell-light brightened as another rider reinforced it, the glow sharpening edges, banishing shadow. Arrigel caught sight of sigils worked into their armor—old ones, stripped of ornament, the kind used when discretion mattered more than heraldry.

"You did well," the leader said again, almost kindly. "Now listen carefully."

She gestured back toward the dark road. "That man is no longer a simple retrieval."

Arrigel swallowed. "Then what is he?"

The woman's eyes flicked briefly toward the night, toward the farmstead beyond the hills.

“A problem,” she said. “And problems like this are not brought in alive unless the Queen commands it.”

The meaning settled heavy and cold.

Arrigel felt her knees weaken as she was hauled up behind the leader, the saddle creaking under their combined weight. As the riders wheeled and spurred their mounts forward, she risked one last glance back the way she had come.

Somewhere beyond those fields, a man with impossible magic stood alone against a world that had just decided he was too dangerous to misunderstand.

And for the first time since she’d fled, Arrigel wondered if running toward help had been the worst choice she could have made.

***

The sound rolled across the fields like a storm that did not belong to the sky.

It was barely past eight. Full dark just settled, the last of the dusk had drained from the horizon, leaving the land in that uneasy in-between where shapes blurred and distance lied. The air was cool enough to bite when breathed hard.

Rhyosyn froze mid-step. “Was that him?”

Catrin did not answer. She was already swinging into the saddle, cloak snapping as she turned her mount toward the sound. Magelight flickered along the yard fence, throwing uneven shadows across packed dirt and stone.

“Those were not hunting shots,” Elowen said, voice tight as she mounted beside her. “Too sharp. Too fast. Too close together.”

Rhyosyn’s heart kicked hard against her ribs as she followed. “If they found him—”

“They did,” Catrin said flatly. “And if he were dead, the Queen would not waste silence on it.”

That was enough.

They drove their horses into a gallop, hooves pounding the ground as night swallowed the road ahead. The wind carried the sharp tang of burnt powder now, faint but unmistakable. No one spoke. There was nothing left to debate.

The farmstead came into view as a low shape against torchlight, the gate still lit, flames guttering in the mild evening breeze.

Four bodies lay outside the wall.

Catrin hauled her reins hard. The horse skidded and snorted, refusing to go closer. Elowen cursed softly as her mount balked as well. Rhyosyn's horse reared once, eyes rolling, then twisted away.

"They fled," Elowen said. "The mounts."

They dismounted without ceremony, steel half drawn, senses sharp. The ground was still warm from the day, blood dark and glossy in the torchlight. Mail caught the firelight in dull flashes. One shield lay split clean through. Another was burned in a way that made Rhyosyn look twice.

The gate stood open.

Inside the yard, Al stood beneath a torch, light painting hard lines across his face. He was calm. Too calm. He was wiping his hands on a cloth, methodical, as if finishing a chore before supper.

At his feet lay a small pile. Rings. Badges. A folded scrap of parchment torn open and already discarded.

He looked up as they entered.

Rhyosyn's breath left her in a rush. "You're alive."

"So far," Al replied.

Catrin stepped past him without a word and looked back through the gate. Four bodies. No movement. No doubt.

"You killed the kidnappers?"

"They announced themselves," Al said. "Seemed polite to respond."

Elowen crouched, lifting one of the badges with two fingers. "Quiet sigils."

"Quiet orders," Al said. "Nothing they wanted found after."

Rhyosyn stared at the bodies again, the torchlight making the blood look almost black. "They came only for you."

"Yes."

Catrin turned on him, anger flashing. "You did not wait."

"I did not have time," he said evenly. "And I was not going to be taken."

The night pressed in around them, alive with crickets and distant movement. From the house came the soft creak of a shutter, then stillness again.

Elowen straightened. "This will not stop."

"No," Al said. "It moves faster now."

Rhyosyn swallowed. “You knew.”

“I hoped I was wrong,” he said. “Or late.”

Catrin rested a hand on her sword hilt, then let it fall. “You are under our protection.”

He met her eyes. “That protection now has a cost.”

She did not look away. “Then we pay it.”

Beyond the wall, the four bodies lay cooling in the night air.

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Chapter Forty-Four

CHAPTER 44

The creak of a door cut through the quiet.

Every head turned as one.

The young woman stepped out into the torchlight, hands folded tightly in front of her, shoulders drawn in. She had changed since earlier. Her hair was bound now, her cloak fastened properly, posture formal despite the tremor running through her frame.

“My mothers have sent me to speak to you,” she said, eyes lowered.

No one moved to interrupt her.

“It was through my effort this man was brought here,” she continued, voice steadying as she spoke. “I stated that we wished to provide escort off of my family’s lands.”

She hesitated, then pressed on.

“That was my intent.”

Elowen tilted her head slightly, studying her. One brow rose. “And your matrons sent you to bear the brunt of their failures?”

Rowena looked up sharply.

Her eyes were a vivid green, bright even in the uneven torchlight, and now they flashed with something close to anger. “No,” she said, the word firm. “They sent me to bear the guilt of my own.”

She gestured toward the gate, toward the four bodies laid out beyond the wall.

“He killed four armed women,” Rowena said. “Women prepared for violence my family and I were not prepared for.”

Her gaze flicked to Al, then away again, as if looking at him directly was still difficult. “We did not witness what happened earlier today,” she went on. “But we heard thunderous crashes. We followed the sound. That is how we found him.” She gestured again, this time more deliberately. “On our land.”

Catrin’s jaw tightened. Rhyosyn shifted her weight, understanding dawning.

“There was no impropriety,” Rowena said quickly. “No breach of conduct. But if rumor spreads that we encountered a lone male and did not render aid—”

She stopped.

She did not need to finish the thought.

Every woman present knew the Crown’s stance. A household that turned away a free male without cause did not get the benefit of explanation. Neglect was treated little differently than betrayal.

Silence stretched.

Elowen exhaled slowly. “So you sheltered him,” she said. “Tried to move him on quietly.”

“Yes,” Rowena replied. “And I failed.”

She squared her shoulders. “I brought danger to my family. I underestimated what followed him. That is mine to answer for.”

Al finally spoke, his voice calm. “They did what they could with what they knew.”

Rowena’s head snapped toward him. “That does not unspill blood,” she said. Then, softer, “Or undo consequences.”

Catrin stepped forward, placing herself subtly between Rowena and the bodies outside. “You acted within reason,” she said. “The Crown does not punish foresight. Only cowardice.”

Rowena’s hands tightened in her cloak. “The Crown decides which is which. Regardless, my mothers have decreed that I owe a blood debt to you.”

She said it to the women gathered in the yard, not to the man standing a few steps away. Her gaze stayed level with Catrin and Elowen, never once straying toward the young marine who had just killed four armed women without raising his voice.

The words landed hard.

Rhyosyn inhaled slowly. “A blood debt,” she repeated. “That is not a light decree.”

“It was not given lightly,” Rowena replied. “Nor was it argued.” She swallowed once. “My family offered shelter. That shelter drew violence. The blood spilled on our soil does not belong to us, but the failure does.”

Elowen studied her for a long moment. “And how do your mothers intend for you to pay it.”

Rowena straightened. Whatever tremor had lived in her hands was gone now. “By service,” she said. “By silence. By bearing witness if the Crown asks questions that must not be answered poorly.” Her jaw set. “And by placing myself at risk before placing my household there again.”

Catrin’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You understand what that means.”

“Yes,” Rowena said. “It means I follow until released. Or until the debt is satisfied.” She hesitated, then added, quieter, “Or until I am no longer able.”

The yard was very still. The torches snapped softly. Somewhere beyond the wall, a night bird cried and fell silent again.

Al shifted his weight at last. Not toward her. Away. Giving her space she had not asked for.

“That is not my demand,” he said evenly.

Rowena did not look at him. “It is not yours to refuse.”

Elowen let out a breath through her nose. “You are young.”

Rowena met her eyes. “I am old enough to know when my name will be spoken in a chamber without me present.”

That earned her a nod.

Catrin glanced once toward the gate, toward the bodies cooling in the night air. “Very well,” she said. “Then the debt is acknowledged.”

Rowena inclined her head, relief and dread crossing her face in equal measure.

Nothing was settled. But something had been bound.

And everyone there understood that blood debts, once named, did not loosen easily.

The moment shattered under the thunder of hooves.

Sound came first. Not one rider. Many. Fast and careless, driving hard along the track that led straight for the gate. The ground vibrated beneath their feet, rhythm heavy enough to feel through the soles of boots.

“Were you followed?” Al asked.

Catrin answered without hesitation. “No.”

She was already moving, angling toward the gate, eyes narrowed as she judged distance and timing. Al’s pistol came up, the magazine sliding home with a practiced click that sounded far too loud in the open yard.

“Elowen, there,” he said, pointing sharply to the left, toward the low stone and stacked firewood. “Catrin, other side of the gate. Rhyosyn, behind me.”

They moved as he spoke. No argument. No questions.

“They are going to rush straight through,” Al continued, voice calm, almost instructional. “They will think speed saves them.”

He turned last to Rowena.

“Over there,” he said, gesturing toward the well and the deep shadow beside the house. “Stay down. Do not move until it is done.”

Rowena nodded once and ran, cloak gathered tight, disappearing into darkness just as the first shapes broke free of the road.

“Let me fire first,” Al said. “Then magic. Catrin, you go in after.”

The plan was simple. Efficient. Utterly ruthless.

The riders burst from the dark at a full charge.

Six of them, maybe eight. The spell-light they carried bounced wildly as mounts thundered forward, armor clattering, confidence riding high on numbers and momentum. They had not slowed. They had not scouted.

They had not learned.

Al waited until the lead rider crossed the threshold of the gate.

Then he fired.

The night cracked open. The first rider vanished from the saddle, body snapping backward as the horse screamed and veered, colliding with the one behind it. Chaos bloomed instantly. A second shot. Another body fell. A third. The charge folded in on itself, horses panicking, riders shouting too late.

Elowen’s spell flared, blue-white light snapping into a hard-edged wall that sent a mount crashing sideways. Rhyosyn’s magic followed, heat and force slamming into clustered bodies, turning momentum into wreckage.

Catrin moved the instant Al stepped forward.

Steel flashed. She vaulted the fallen gate rail and went in low, blade precise, ruthless in the tight press of bodies and screaming horses. No wasted motion. No hesitation.

Al advanced behind her, firing only when he had clear lanes, each shot deliberate, each one final.

The fight was over in seconds.

When silence returned, it was broken only by the whine of injured horses and the crackle of torchlight.

Catrin wiped her blade on the grass and looked back at Al. “That was a retrieval force.”

“Yes,” he said, scanning the dark beyond the road. “And they did not expect resistance.”

Rhyosyn swallowed. “They will now.”

From the shadows near the house, Rowena watched with wide eyes, the weight of her blood debt settling heavier by the heartbeat.

Once more, the notification surfaced.

This time, Rowena Stanton saw it.

The light did not flare. It did not announce itself loudly. It simply appeared, crisp and unavoidable, hovering at the edge of her vision as if the world itself insisted she acknowledge it.

SYSTEM NOTICE FEUD STATUS UPDATED

Engagement Recorded: Third Confirmed Clash Location: Stanton Holdings, Outer Atherai Primary Parties: – House Tanim – Crown Retrieval Assets

Casualties Logged: – Crown Forces: 6 – Allied Assets: 0 – Civilian Holdings: Compromised (Political Risk Elevated)

Legal Consequences: – Right of Immediate Sanction: GRANTED – Discretionary Force: AUTHORIZED

Witness Acknowledged: Rowena Stanton Status: Bound by Blood Debt Obligation: Record, Testify, or Atone

Rowena’s breath caught.

She looked up from the empty air, hands trembling, the sounds of the yard returning all at once. The wounded horses. The murmurs. The smell of blood and burnt magic.

Three engagements.

Open hostility.

Termination permitted.

She had thought a blood debt was heavy before.

Now she understood what it meant to be named by the System itself.

***

The chamber was quiet enough to hear ink dry.

Queen Thorn stood at the tall window overlooking the inner court, hands clasped behind her back, posture immaculate. Night had fully claimed the city now. Lanterns traced clean lines through stone and marble, ordered, obedient. As it should be.

The notification arrived without ceremony.

It did not glow brightly. It did not announce itself with sound. It simply asserted its presence, sharp and undeniable, in the space before her eyes.

Queen Thorn did not move at once.

She read it once. Then again.

She turned from the window at last, heels clicking softly against the stone floor as she crossed to the long table at the center of the chamber. With deliberate care, she rested her palms against its polished surface.

“A problem,” she said quietly.

The word carried no heat. No anger. Only classification.

From the shadows along the wall, a woman stepped forward and knelt, head bowed. “Your Majesty.”

Queen Thorn did not look at her. “Collectors underestimated the target.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“They were warned,” the Queen said. “The first report made that clear.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Silence stretched again.

“The System has authorized termination,” Queen Thorn continued. “That is not mercy. That is admission.”

The kneeling woman swallowed but did not speak.

Queen Thorn straightened, spine rigid, expression unreadable. “Three engagements,” she said. “That is no longer coincidence. It is a clear pattern.”

She turned her head slightly. “And patterns invite attention.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Prepare the Quiet Legates,” Queen Thorn ordered.

The woman bowed lower. “At once.”

Queen Thorn returned her gaze to the window, to the ordered lights of her city. Somewhere beyond those walls, far beyond proper lanes of control, a man had survived what should have ended him twice already.

Thrice.

Her reflection stared back at her in the dark glass, crown of thorns gleaming faintly in the lamplight.

“No more failures,” Queen Thorn said.

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Chapter Forty-Five

CHAPTER 45

Al sat on his heels, staring at the heap of dead women at his feet.

Torchlight painted them in harsh, uneven strokes. Armor dented. Cloaks tangled. Blood darkening the dirt where it pooled and soaked away. The smell hung heavy now, iron and smoke and something sharper beneath it.

“Elowen,” Al said quietly. “Do we even know who they were?”

His voice was calm. Too calm. Flat in a way that made the women near him exchange quick glances. It was the tone he used when something had crossed from immediate danger into something worse.

Catrin let out a slow breath. “We thought they were agents of Sexanheim,” she said. “Or one of their vassal states.”

Thought.

Al’s eyes did not leave the bodies. “Thought based on what.”

“Equipment. Discipline. The way they moved,” Catrin replied. “They fit the pattern.”

Silence stretched again.

Then Rhyosyn spoke.

“The voice was wrong.”

They turned toward her.

She stood a few paces back, arms folded tight across her chest. Her words were measured, dispassionate, but her eyes were not. They were too bright, fixed on the dark beyond the gate as if expecting something to step out of it.

“It was not a continental accent,” Rhyosyn continued. “Not coastal either. The cadence was clipped. Formal. Like someone taught to speak correctly rather than naturally.”

Catrin frowned. “You are certain.”

Rhyosyn nodded once. “I am.”

Al finally looked up.

“Foreign,” he said.

“Yes,” Rhyosyn replied. “But not from where we expected.”

The torches crackled. Somewhere beyond the wall, an injured horse screamed and then went quiet.

Catrin's jaw tightened. "If they were not Sexanheim, then they were closer."

"Or higher," Rhyosyn said.

Al rose slowly to his feet. "Collectors lie. Hunters posture," he said. "These didn't do either."

"No," Catrin agreed. "They announced authority."

That settled it.

Al looked back down at the bodies one last time. "Then this wasn't probing," he said. "It was confirmation."

Rhyosyn swallowed. "Confirmation of what."

"That I'm worth the trouble," Al replied.

No one contradicted him.

Because standing there, with the dead at their feet and the night pressing in, every one of them understood the same thing.

Whatever line had existed before tonight was gone.

Al let out a slow breath and looked at the flashing notifications hovering at the edge of his vision.

More names. More tallies. More dead women added to a ledger he never asked to keep.

On Earth, the memory came unbidden. Fire and noise. Men screaming. Men shooting back. He had felt nothing then beyond focus and the need to keep moving. That had been war. Clean, in its own brutal way.

This was different.

He looked down at the bodies again. Women in armor. Women with orders. Women who would have dragged him in chains if he had let them.

It still sat wrong in his gut.

"I'm going to have to get over it," he muttered.

Rhyosyn heard him. Her jaw tightened, but she said nothing.

Al straightened. "We need to get going." He swept his gaze over the yard and the dark road beyond. "Try to round up any of their horses. We have ten minutes. Then we're gone."

No one questioned it. They scattered immediately, moving with urgency now, not caution.

Catrin paused only long enough to lean toward Rhyosyn, lowering her voice. "What's a minute?"

Rhyosyn blinked. “A… minute.”

“Yes,” Catrin said patiently. “He keeps using it like a measure.”

Rhyosyn glanced toward Al, then back at Catrin. “I don't know. I think it’s a short span of time, but I don't know how long.”

Catrin frowned.

Al watched them go, then forced his attention back to the road, the bodies, the dark beyond the torches.

Ten minutes.

He let the ladies handle the horses.

That was not humility. It was practicality.

He had seen mounted patrols used in Afghanistan, usually for terrain vehicles could not manage, but he had never ridden one himself. He trusted his feet more than a creature that could panic at noise, blood, or the wrong shadow. The women moved with easy familiarity, voices low, hands steady as they worked to calm, catch, and assess what mounts could still be used.

Al stayed where he was, eyes up, watching the dark beyond the torches.

Catrin returned first.

She knelt where he had laid the recovered items earlier and gathered them with brisk efficiency. Rings. Badges. Papers. She produced a rough sack from somewhere, likely a grain bag pressed into new purpose, and dropped everything inside without ceremony.

Then she turned to the bodies.

Rhyosyn glanced over. “Looting already.”

“Recovering,” Catrin replied, already at work. “They do not need it anymore. We might.”

Al exhaled. “Fair.”

With a sigh, he moved to help.

He started with weapons.

Spears first. He checked shafts for cracks, points for bends, stacking usable ones apart from the rest. Swords next, testing balance, edge, weight. A few were poor quality. One was good enough that he set it aside deliberately.

He left the armor on the bodies.

Too slow to remove. Too noisy. Too much time with his hands down and his focus elsewhere. If they survived the night, they could come back for it or strip it somewhere safer.

Catrin worked methodically, checking boots, belts, pouches. No glee. No hesitation. Just necessity.

“You’re not taking the armor,” she noted.

“Not yet,” Al said. “Weapons travel. Armor anchors you.”

She nodded, approving.

From the yard came soft whickers as the women managed to secure two horses that had not bolted far. Another was limping and was left where it stood. No one argued about it.

Al stacked the last usable blade and straightened, wiping his hands on his pants. The sack was heavier now. Useful heavy.

“Five minutes,” he said.

Catrin cinched the sack closed and slung it over her shoulder. “Plenty.”

Al looked once more at the bodies, at the armor still gleaming dully in torchlight.

Then he turned away.

“I should gather food,” Elowen said as she led two of the recovered horses toward the stable.

The animals balked almost immediately, hooves scraping as they caught the scent. Their ears pinned back, eyes rolling white as they shied away from the dark splatters staining the packed earth.

Al watched them carefully. “They don’t like the blood,” he noted.

“Horses remember,” Elowen said quietly, steadying them with practiced hands. “They always do.”

“I’ll handle the food,” Al said.

The confidence in his voice made Elowen pause. She glanced back at him, then at the yard, then at the sack of salvaged gear already slung over Catrin’s shoulder.

“You know what you’re looking for,” she said, not quite a question.

“I know what we need,” Al replied. “Calories. Protein. Something we can carry and eat without stopping.”

Elowen studied him for a moment, then nodded. “The larder’s through there,” she said, gesturing toward the house. “Left of the hearth.”

Al shook his head. “Save it.”

That stopped her.

“I’ll handle food,” he said. “All of it.”

Elowen frowned. “We still need—”

“I’ve got it covered,” Al said, already turning away. “Trust me.”

She hesitated, then returned to the horses. Time mattered more than understanding right now.

Al stepped into the shadow between the stable wall and the outer fence and exhaled once.

Then he reached inward.

The summons came quietly. No flare. No scent. No disturbance in the air at all. Just weight appearing in his hands, one item after another, solid and sealed.

Brown pouches. Hard plastic. Crimped edges. Markings that meant nothing here.

Meals, Ready-to-Eat.

He stacked them quickly. Beef. Chicken. Pasta. Energy bars. Drink mixes. Every pouch airtight, inert, giving off no smell that the horses could catch or that the night could carry.

When he stepped back into the yard, Elowen was fastening the stable door. She turned and stopped short.

“That’s… not bread,” she said.

“No,” Al replied, setting the stack down. “It’s better.”

Catrin approached, lifting one of the pouches and turning it in her hands. “There’s no scent,” she noted. “Nothing at all.”

“They’re sealed,” Al said. “Individually. They don’t spoil. You can eat them cold. You can eat them while walking.”

Rhyosyn crouched beside the pile. “This much food,” she said slowly, “would usually announce itself.”

“It won’t,” Al replied. “No fires. No cooking. No trail.”

Elowen reached out, hesitated, then pressed her thumb against the pouch. She looked up at him, something uneasy settling behind her eyes. “You plan like someone who expects pursuit.”

“I plan like someone who’s survived it,” Al said.

Catrin straightened. “How long will this last.”

“As long as we need it to,” he replied. “We ration smart, we keep moving.”

They broke the stack down quickly, distributing the pouches among packs. The horses remained uneasy, but the absence of scent helped. No fresh blood smell added to the air. No food to draw attention.

“Two minutes,” Al said.

No one argued.

The torches burned low as they finished loading, shadows stretching across ground already marked by violence. Al took one last look at the gate and the bodies they had left armored and unstripped.

“We head east,” Al announced as they rode out through the gate, hooves thudding softly on packed earth. “Then south.”

No one questioned the choice. They adjusted their reins and fell into line as the farmstead slipped behind them, torches dwindling to dull embers against the night.

Rhyosyn rode up beside him. “East first puts us closer to settled roads.”

“Yes,” Al said. “Which is why we won’t stay on them.”

Catrin glanced back once, toward the dark shape of her family’s land. She understood without needing it spelled out. “You’re laying a trail.”

“A bad one,” Al replied. “One they’ll follow hard.”

Catrin frowned slightly. “That puts the Stanton family under scrutiny.”

“They already are,” Al said evenly. “Kidnappers died on their soil. That question gets asked no matter what we do.” He shifted in the saddle, eyes scanning the dark ahead. “If we vanish clean, the Crown squeezes them until something breaks. If we leave noise, confusion, and a clear direction, the pressure follows us instead.”

Rhyosyn exhaled slowly. “You’re giving them a story.”

“I’m giving them certainty,” Al said. “East means trade roads. South means border traffic. It looks like flight, not planning.”

Catrin nodded. “And when they question the family.”

“They answer truthfully,” Al replied. “We left in haste. We fled east. I said we would turn south.” He paused. “None of that will be a lie.”

The horses settled into a steady pace as the land opened up, fields giving way to hedgerows and low stone markers half-lost in shadow. The night air cooled further, carrying only the sounds of movement and breath.

Rowena rode near the rear, silent, shoulders tight. She knew what this meant. The blood debt had just deepened, not lessened.

“How long do we keep it up,” Elowen asked.

“Long enough for them to commit,” Al said. “Once they move assets south, we cut west and vanish into ground that doesn’t support cavalry.”

Catrin gave him a sharp look. “You’ve done this before?”

“No, I've read about it.” Al said.

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Chapter Forty-Six

CHAPTER 46

"Why did you say which direction we were going, in front of my family?" Elowen asked.

They rode at a steady pace now, hooves muted by grass and packed earth as the road stretched out ahead of them. The farmstead was long out of sight, swallowed by the dark.

"I gave them a convenient lie for when they're questioned," Al said with a shrug. "If the Crown has magic that can peel truth from fiction, then it had to be true. East, then south. Something simple they could say without hesitation."

Elowen stared at him. Shock crossed her face, followed by something heavier. "You did that to protect them."

"Yes."

"But what of us?" she pressed. "We're a target."

"We're a moving target," Al replied. "Best kind. Hard to pin down. They won't know where to aim until we strike."

That did not comfort her as much as he probably intended, but she nodded anyway.

They reached a crossroads, the stone marker half-buried and worn smooth by years of travel. Al slowed his horse and lifted his gaze to the sky.

The night above them was crowded with stars. More than he was used to. No haze. No glow from cities. Just cold, sharp light scattered across black.

"We go north," he said, turning his horse onto the narrower track.

Catrin reined in beside him. "How do you know this is north."

Al raised an arm and pointed upward. "See those stars there?" He traced the shape in the air. "That cluster. We call it the Big Dipper. The end of it points to the North Star. If you ride toward that, you're heading north."

Rhyosyn leaned back in her saddle, following the line of his finger. A faint smile touched her lips. "We don't call it that."

Al glanced at her. "What do you call it."

“The Hearth-Ladle,” she said. “The gods are said to have placed it in the sky to remind us that even the heavens must be tended.” She shifted her hand slightly. “And that smaller pattern beside it, the one that mirrors it.”

“The Little Dipper,” Al said automatically.

Rhyosyn shook her head. “We call that one the Child’s Cup. It follows the Hearth-Ladle, never straying far.”

Catrin considered the stars again, seeing them anew. “And the fixed star.”

“The Nail of the Sky,” Rhyosyn said. “Everything turns around it.”

Al nodded slowly. Different names. Same truth.

“North it is,” he said.

They rode on beneath unfamiliar constellations, guided by a sky that did not care who hunted whom, or how many blood debts had been named below it.

“We’ll find a place to stop soon,” Al said.

Catrin shot him a sharp look. “Is that a good idea.”

“If you run tired, you make mistakes,” Al replied. “And I’ve got the feeling our enemy is bigger than we are.” He glanced back along the dark road, then forward again. “Right now our assets are me, you three—”

“What about me?” Elowen asked.

Al did not hesitate. “Four.”

That single word settled something.

Catrin exhaled slowly. “Stopping means fire.”

“No,” Al said. “Stopping means quiet. Shelter. We eat cold. No light. No noise.”

Rhyosyn nodded. “There are folds in the land north of here. Old shepherd hollows. Easy to miss if you don’t know where to look.”

“Good,” Al said. “We take one. Two hours. No more.”

“And if they catch us resting?” Elowen asked.

“They won’t,” Al replied. “Because they’ll be chasing the trail we gave them.”

He shifted in the saddle, scanning the dark as if already mapping ground no one else could see. “Rest is not weakness,” he added. “It’s preparation.”

No one argued.

They rode on, slower now, deliberate, each breath measured. Above them, the Nail of the Sky held steady, uncaring and constant, while below it four riders moved like ghosts through a world that had decided they should not exist.

***

They rode for another hour before they found a shallow hollow tucked between low rises and scrub. From the road it was nothing. From above it would have been invisible. The kind of place travelers passed without ever knowing it was there.

Al swung down first and looked around, eyes moving, counting angles.

“Back home,” he said lightly, “there would almost certainly have been the remains of a still here.”

“A still?” Rhyosyn asked as she dismounted.

Al grunted. “Yeah. Where I come from this kind of ground was bootlegger country. Folks who made white lightning and sold it.”

Elowen frowned. “Lightning.”

“Alcohol,” Al said, then chuckled. “Not the magic kind. Nearly pure. Strong enough to knock you flat if you weren’t careful.”

Rhyosyn smiled faintly. “I can make lightning.”

“Different sort,” Al replied. “Yours kills. The other just ruins decisions.”

While the women talked, Al moved.

He prowled the hollow in a widening circle, boots silent, head tilted as he listened to the night. Elowen did not see what he gathered, only that he returned and knelt near the center of the hollow.

He laid four things out on the ground.

First, a length of cord. Not rope. Thin, strong, dull in color.

Second, a small flat device no bigger than his palm, dark and unremarkable.

Third, a roll of fabric that unfolded into something like a low tent skin, mottled and ugly in a way that felt deliberate.

Catrin crouched. “What are those.”

“Sleep,” Al said. “Safety. Warning.”

He picked up the cord and began setting it low across the outer edge of the hollow, threading it through brush and stone so it vanished unless you knew where to look.

Rhyosyn watched closely. “A ward.”

“Tripline,” Al corrected. “No magic. Just tells me someone’s there.”

He placed the flat device near the line and tapped it once. “That listens.”

Elowen swallowed. “And the cloth.”

“Shelter,” Al said. “No fire. No light. No smell.”

He finished setting the line, then gestured them inward. “Six hours. We eat cold. We sleep in turns.”

Catrin nodded. “Who takes first watch.”

“I do,” Al said. “Then you. Then Rhyosyn.”

Elowen hesitated. “And me.”

Al looked at her. “You rest with Rowena."

She opened her mouth to argue, then stopped. Slowly, she nodded.

They settled into the hollow as the stars wheeled overhead, the Hearth-Ladle tipping slowly through the sky. No flames marked their presence. No sound carried beyond breath and shifting cloth.

Somewhere far behind them, hunters would be riding hard in the wrong direction.

Al lay back against the cool earth and let the darkness settle around him. He did not remember a time when the night had truly been dark. Even in the deserts where he had served, there was always glow on the horizon. Cities. Bases. Fires. Something bleeding light into the sky.

Here, there was nothing.

Stars burned sharp and close, bright enough to feel. The land breathed quietly beneath them.

He shifted and moved higher along the hollow, careful and slow, until he could see out over the surrounding ground without breaking the line of cover. He checked his status out of habit.

Mana full.

Good.

He reached inward and summoned again, shaping intent into form. The monocular appeared in his hand, cool and familiar. He raised it to his eye and the world bloomed into shades of green, every stone and blade of grass suddenly clear. He swept the horizon in practiced arcs, checking low ground, ridges, movement.

Nothing.

That was when he heard it. Soft movement. Fabric shifting.

Al angled the monocular back toward the hollow.

One of the ponchos lifted. A figure slipped free, careful, deliberate.

“Al?” came a soft call.

He adjusted the focus and saw her clearly.

Catrin.

She moved with confidence, head up, shoulders squared, eyes already searching for him. Of the three, she had always struck him as the boldest. The one who did not wait for permission when a decision needed to be made.

“Catrin,” he said quietly. “What are you doing?”

She stopped a few steps away, hands relaxed at her sides. “I thought I would speak with you. We haven’t had much opportunity. And if we are to be wed…”

She let the thought hang.

Al grunted, not dismissive, just acknowledging the weight of it. “I suppose we should get to know one another better.”

Her gaze flicked to the device in his hand. “What is that?”

He lowered it and held it out to her. “Night vision monocular. Like binoculars, but you use one eye.”

She hesitated only a moment before taking it. “And it lets you see in the dark.”

“Without light,” he said. “Try it.”

She raised it, frowned when the world vanished, then inhaled sharply.

“Oh,” she breathed.

The darkness transformed for her. Terrain. Depth. Distance. All of it suddenly visible. She turned slowly, sweeping the land just as he had.

“This is… unfair,” she said quietly.

He smiled faintly. “That’s one word for it.”

She lowered the monocular and handed it back, her expression thoughtful now. “You watch the night like it’s an old friend.”

“I trust it more than daylight,” Al replied. “Daylight lies. Shadows tell the truth.”

Catrin studied him for a long moment. “You don’t look like a man who expected to be hunted by queens.”

“No,” he said. “But I expected to be hunted.”

She absorbed that, then nodded once. “Then I’m glad you’re watching.”

He inclined his head slightly. “Go back. Rest while you can.”

She did not move right away. “Al.”

“Yes.”

“If this ends badly… I want you to know I chose this.”

He met her eyes in the dark. “That matters.”

She nodded, then turned and slipped back beneath the ponchos, leaving him alone with the stars and the quiet.

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Chapter Forty-Seven

CHAPTER 47

He woke Catrin after two hours with a light touch and a quiet word.

She came awake instantly, hand already moving before she recognized him. That alone told him he'd picked the right one for second watch.

He slid down into her vacated spot without ceremony, muscles loosening as the tension finally bled off. Only then did he realize he hadn't once worried about whether they understood what an hour was supposed to mean. Either they had a concept close enough, or whatever translated his words smoothed it over.

"May I use the scope?" Catrin asked softly.

"Sure," Al replied, lifting it and handing it to her.

"Just about anyone moving around tonight isn't our friend."

Catrin nodded once, already scanning the dark with growing confidence.

Satisfied, Al lay back and let his attention turn inward.

The status pane bloomed into existence, crisp and familiar.

Name: Aleric Tanim Origin: United States of America Blessing: American Magic Affiliation: House Tanim Level: 2

Strength: 13 Constitution: 13 Dexterity: 9 Agility: 13 Mind: 15 Wisdom: 11 Charisma: 9 Luck: 16

Unassigned Attribute Pool: 12 Summoning Capacity: 140 cu in

He stared at the numbers, replaying the night in his head.

Speed had kept him alive. Awareness had kept him ahead. Mana had kept everyone fed and armed. But it was already clear this was not a problem he could shoot his way out of forever.

He needed to move faster. Think faster. Recover faster.

And he needed people.

Allies did not come from firepower alone.

He already knew Luck was locked unless he held points back. That could wait. Luck always did its own thing anyway.

For now, balance mattered.

He assigned the points deliberately.

Mind +3 Wisdom +3 Charisma +3 Dexterity +3

The numbers shifted, subtle but immediate. He felt it as a sharpening rather than a surge. Thoughts lining up cleaner. Awareness settling deeper. Words feeling heavier, more deliberate, like they might actually land where he intended.

Good.

He closed the panel and let himself breathe.

Above him, the stars wheeled in their slow, indifferent paths. Nearby, Catrin watched the night through borrowed eyes, guarding him without complaint.

For the first time since the gate, Al allowed himself to rest.

Just a little.

Because when he woke again, the world would still be hunting him.

***

“They knew nothing,” the scout reported.

She stood at attention despite the dust caked on her boots and the dried blood on her cloak. Her voice was steady, professional, stripped of apology.

The troop leader closed her eyes for a moment and exhaled through her nose.

“The Three will not be pleased,” she said at last.

Around them, lantern light revealed the aftermath. A wagon with its gate torn loose and hanging crooked. Stone stained dark where bodies had been laid and then taken away. The air still carried the sour echo of decay no amount of water had fully chased off.

“All we have,” the leader continued, opening her eyes, “is a heap of bodies, a blasted wagon, a missing consort, and a load of problems.”

The scout shifted her weight. “The family answered cleanly. No contradictions. No fear tells.”

“That is the problem,” the leader replied. “Fear lies. Calm does not.”

She turned and looked out over the yard, jaw tightening as she took in the absence where certainty should have been.

“Aleric Tanim does not flee blindly,” she said. “And he does not inspire loyalty by accident.”

“Orders?” the scout asked.

The leader was silent for several heartbeats.

“Double the quiet riders,” she said finally. “No banners. No colors. We stop chasing roads and start watching water, passes, and old ground.”

“And the family?”

“They will be watched,” the leader said. “Not punished. Not yet.” Her mouth thinned. “If we press them now and they break, we learn nothing. If we leave them breathing, they may yet make a mistake.”

She turned back to the scout. “Send word up the chain. Tell them the trail is deliberate.”

The scout nodded. “And the missing consort?”

The leader’s gaze hardened. “He chose motion over safety.”

That was all the judgment she gave.

“Dismissed,” she said.

As the scout turned away, the leader looked once more at the empty space where the bodies had lain, then lifted her gaze to the dark sky beyond the lantern glow.

The Matrons of the Council would not be pleased.

Not that judgment rested with a mere captain of horse. That weight belonged to women who sat behind stone and doctrine, who counted lives in columns and consequences in seasons. She was only here to gather facts and keep the bleeding contained.

And if they did find the man, what then.

He had left a trail of bodies behind him. Enemies, to be sure. Armed. Ordered. Sent with purpose. Still, blood was blood, and the Crown counted every drop whether it was spilled in defense or defiance.

They were almost certain the true enemy was the Queens of the Waves. The patterns fit too neatly. The accents. The timing. The way authority had been asserted without heraldry.

Almost.

And almost only counted in tamarind and tales.

The captain’s mouth tightened.

If this was a foreign incursion, then the Crown had already misstepped. If it was internal, then something far worse was unfolding beneath the surface. Either way, the man at the center of it was not the cause.

He was the spark.

She turned back toward the camp, already composing the report she would send upward. Careful wording. No conclusions. Only facts that

would force the Matrons to argue among themselves.

Let them decide what to do with a problem they had allowed to grow.

Her task was simpler.

Find him.

And pray, quietly and without conviction, that someone above her knew what to do once she did.

***

The knock came at 7:12 in the morning.

Three firm raps. Measured. Professional.

Margaret Tanim paused at the sink, dish towel in her hands. She glanced at the clock, then toward the door. That cadence was not accidental.

She wiped her hands and opened the door partway.

Two women and a man stood on the porch. Dark suits. Conservative shoes. Neutral expressions. No badges were displayed, but they carried themselves like people who had never needed them.

She inclined her head slightly. “Officers. How may I help you?”

The man in the center nodded. “Mrs. Tanim. Daniel Harper. Federal government. May we come in.”

She opened the door fully and stepped aside. “Of course.”

They entered without looking around, without touching anything. They waited for her to gesture before sitting. That confirmed her read.

Once seated, Harper spoke. “This concerns your son, Aleric Tanim.”

Margaret folded her hands on the table. “Is he alive.”

“We have no confirmation that he is deceased,” Harper said.

She nodded once. “Then how may I help you.”

“We’re conducting a biological baseline review,” Harper said. “Your son has demonstrated several anomalies. We need to determine whether they are inherited or spontaneous.”

Margaret raised an eyebrow. “You want my DNA.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And if I refuse.”

“Then the request ends,” Harper replied evenly. “But the investigation continues through other means.”

She considered that for a moment, then nodded. “Very well.”

The swab was taken properly. Labeled. Sealed. Logged. No rush. No drama.

“This will not be immediate,” one of the women said. “Results will take several days.”

“As they should,” Margaret replied.

The questions that followed were clinical and careful.

Did Al recover quickly from injuries. Did he ever exhibit unexplained stamina or resistance. Was there any family history of unusual conditions.

Margaret answered honestly.

“No.” She paused and thought. “Nothing beyond normal.” She watched as the officers wrote down her answers. “Stubbornness runs in the family. That’s about it.”

Harper paused as he reviewed his notes. “We’ll need to ask about Aleric’s father.”

Margaret’s hands stilled on the table.

“I don’t know who he is,” she said quietly.

That earned a glance, not judgmental, just recalibrating.

“You’re not in contact,” Harper clarified.

“I was never in contact,” she replied with a bitter laugh. “I didn’t know his name. It was a… different time.”

Agent Cane made a small note. “Do you recall anything that might help identify him.”

Margaret exhaled slowly. There was no shame in her voice now, just honesty. “I had a wild childhood. I straightened up when I found out I was pregnant, but by then my parents had already put me out of the house. It was sink or swim.”

No one interrupted her.

“I chose swim,” she finished.

Harper nodded once. “Understood.”

“Are your parents still alive,” Agent Lewis asked.

“No,” Margaret said. “They passed years ago.”

“Siblings.”

“One sister. Estranged.”

Another note. Another quiet recalculation.

Harper looked up. “Did your parents ever mention unusual ancestry. Anything out of the ordinary.”

Margaret gave a short, humorless laugh. “They were strict, not mystical. If there was anything unusual in the family, it would have been talked out of us.”

That earned the faintest hint of a smile from Agent Cane.

Harper closed his notebook. “Mrs. Tanim, everything you’ve told us is consistent with our preliminary findings.”

“And what findings are those,” Margaret asked.

“That your son’s anomalies are not the result of known genetic inheritance,” Harper said. “At least not in any conventional sense.”

She nodded slowly. “So you still don’t know.”

“No,” he admitted. “But we will.”

They stood to leave after that. At the door, Harper turned back once more.

“You did well,” he said. “Raising him. Whatever he is now, that part came from you.”

Margaret held his gaze. “He’s my son. That’s all that ever mattered.”

She paused and reached out to Agent Harper. "If, if you find out who his father is, I don't think I want or need to know. Just try to bring Al back to me."

After they left, she stood alone in the quiet kitchen, the weight of old choices resurfacing in ways she hadn’t expected.

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Chapter Forty-Eight

CHAPTER 48

The hollow held their heat like a cupped hand.

No fire burned. No lamps. Only starlight filtering down through the lip of earth and brush. The ponchos Al had summoned lay draped over them like dull skins, breaking up shapes and shadows. Even their breathing seemed too loud in the stillness.

Catrin watched the edge of the hollow through the monocular, one eye closed, the other seeing a world washed in green. She swept slow and steady the way Al had shown her. The tripline cord lay out there somewhere, low and invisible, waiting to tug and speak with a silent warning.

And while nothing moved it did not mean nothing watched.

Behind her, the others lay under cover. Rhyosyn sat half upright, knees drawn up, arms around them, eyes open in the dark. Elowen lay on her side but not asleep. Rowena was the farthest from the lip, tucked near the deepest shadow of the hollow, wrapped tight in the poncho as if she could fold herself out of existence.

Catrin lowered the monocular and blinked as the night returned to normal. Stars snapped into their true brightness. The darkness became honest again, deep and absolute.

She turned her head slightly and spoke without raising her voice.

“We need to talk.”

Elowen shifted. “Now.”

“Yes,” Catrin said. “Now. Before morning. Before we start moving again.”

Rhyosyn’s gaze flicked toward Rowena’s shape, then back. “About what.”

Catrin didn’t answer at first. She took a slow breath, tasting damp earth and cold grass. Then she said it plainly.

“About us.”

Elowen let out a quiet sound, half a sigh, half a laugh with no humor in it. “We’re riding with a hunted man.”

“And we’re promised to him,” Catrin replied.

“Promised,” Rhyosyn echoed softly, as if testing the word. Her eyes were sharp even in the dark. “Or assigned.”

Catrin held her gaze. “Either way, it’s ours now.”

They sat with that for a moment. The hollow creaked with small sounds of fabric and shifting weight. Somewhere in the far distance, a night bird called once and went silent.

Elowen spoke first. “We can’t undo it.”

“No,” Catrin agreed.

Rhyosyn’s voice remained controlled, but there was a tremor of intensity beneath it. “We could still split. Scatter. Make it harder for the Crown to take all of us.”

Catrin shook her head. “Harder. Not impossible.”

Elowen made a low sound. “And if we scatter, we lose him.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes narrowed. “We might have to.”

Catrin looked at her. “Say that again. Out loud.”

Rhyosyn did not flinch. “If the choice becomes him or survival.”

Elowen’s hand tightened on the poncho near her chest. “He saved our lives tonight.”

“He also brought something down on our heads,” Rhyosyn replied. Still calm. Still precise. “Those can both be true.”

Catrin leaned forward slightly. “This enemy was coming anyway. You heard the collectors. You saw their posture. They weren’t here for negotiation.”

Rhyosyn’s jaw set. “They were here for him.”

“And we are here now too,” Catrin said. “That’s what I’m talking about. We need to decide what we are, before someone else decides it for us.”

Elowen stared into the dark, then spoke quietly. “We’re already being decided. By the Crown. By the Council. By whatever the System is.”

Rhyosyn nodded once. “But not by him. He\s as much a pawn in this as we are.”

That earned a pause.

“That's right he’s not deciding us,” she said finally. “He’s surviving. That’s different.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes flicked toward where Al lay sleeping, deeper under the poncho, face turned away. His breathing was slow, controlled. A soldier’s rest.

“Surviving,” Rhyosyn said. “By making choices. All of them affect us.”

Elowen looked down at her hands. “What do you want, Catrin.”

Catrin didn’t smile. “I want a united front. Sisterhood.”

That word settled into the hollow like a stone dropped into water. The ripple was immediate, silent, and unavoidable.

Elowen’s lips pressed together. “We already have it.”

“We have the story of it,” Catrin corrected. “We have sayings. Etiquette. We have what our mothers told us to repeat. Sisterhood before steel. She who guards the hearth guards the crown.” She paused. “But we do not have it in practice. ”

Rhyosyn’s voice was soft. “And you think we need it now.”

Catrin nodded. “We can’t afford cracks. Not with hunters behind us and the Crown above us and some nebulous enemy before us. One mistake, one moment of panic, one argument at the wrong time, and we die.”

Elowen’s gaze slid again toward Rowena’s dark shape. “And this is about her.”

Catrin did not deny it. “Yes.”

Rowena stiffened under the poncho. She did not speak. She did not move. But the tension in her posture changed. Like a rabbit hearing the hawk.

Rhyosyn looked toward Rowena, then back. “She has a blood debt.”

Elowen’s voice dropped lower. “And a witness.”

Catrin kept her voice even. “And a problem. We need to decide what she is to us before the Crown decides what she is to them.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes flashed. “She is a liability.”

Elowen’s expression tightened. “She’s a young woman who tried to do what she thought was right.”

“Trying doesn’t matter,” Rhyosyn said. “Results matter.”

Catrin lifted a hand slightly, cutting off the beginning of an argument before it could gain momentum. “We’re not doing this to tear her apart. We’re doing this because she exists. And because the System named her.”

Elowen swallowed. “That notice…”

“Yes,” Catrin said. “Witness acknowledged. Blood debt recorded.”

Rhyosyn exhaled slowly. “Once the System names you, you don’t vanish.”

“Exactly,” Catrin replied. “So let’s speak plainly.”

She shifted so she could see both women clearly in the starlight. “We have three options.”

Elowen’s eyes narrowed. “Say them.”

“One,” Catrin said. “We leave her behind.”

Rowena’s breath caught audibly. A small, involuntary sound.

Rhyosyn’s gaze stayed fixed on Catrin. “That would be clean.”

Elowen shook her head. “No. That would be cruel.”

Catrin held up two fingers. “Two. We try to clear the debt.”

Rhyosyn made a low sound of disbelief. “How.”

“Weregild. Service. Appeal to a matron,” Catrin said. “Anything that turns blood into a ledger entry that can be settled.”

Elowen’s voice went quiet. “And the third.”

Catrin lifted a third finger. “We take her in.”

No one spoke for several heartbeats.

The hollow felt smaller.

Rhyosyn broke the silence first. “Taking her in means we own her debt.”

Elowen’s tone was cautious. “Or we share it.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes hardened. “Same thing.”

Catrin nodded. “Yes.”

Rhyosyn leaned forward slightly. “We cannot afford to carry extra weight.”

Elowen bristled at the phrasing. “She’s not weight.”

“She is risk,” Rhyosyn snapped, then caught herself and forced her voice back down. “She is a named witness. The Crown can squeeze her. Break her. Use her as a knife aimed at us.”

Elowen’s hands tightened. “So we abandon her and let the Crown own her outright.”

Rhyosyn’s jaw clenched. “We do what we must to survive.”

Catrin watched them both. “If we leave her behind, what happens.”

Rhyosyn answered instantly. “She is taken. Questioned. Used. If she breaks, she tells them what little she knows.”

Elowen’s voice was bitter. “And if she doesn’t break.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes were flat. “Then she dies. Or becomes property.”

Elowen flinched.

Catrin did not. “And what happens to the debt.”

Rhyosyn hesitated for the first time. “It follows.”

Catrin nodded. “That’s the part people pretend isn’t true. Blood debts don’t dissolve because you walk away.”

Elowen’s voice was soft. “The land remembers.”

Rhyosyn’s gaze dropped, then returned. “Fine. Then we clear it.”

Catrin’s expression remained steady. “How.”

Rhyosyn’s lips pressed together. “We pay.”

“With what,” Catrin asked. “Coin. Service. Authority.”

Elowen shook her head. “We don’t have coin. We don’t have time. And the Crown won’t accept a settlement after bodies are stacked at their gate.”

Catrin nodded once. “It’s bigger now. The System recorded it. The feud is open. There is no quiet settlement.”

Rhyosyn’s jaw worked. She didn’t like that. She didn’t like being cornered by logic, and Catrin could see it in her eyes.

“So,” Catrin said softly, “that leaves taking her in.”

Elowen looked toward Rowena’s shape again. “If we take her in, she becomes ours.”

Rhyosyn’s voice was sharp. “If we take her in, we become hers too.”

Catrin answered calmly. “If we take her in, the Crown has to break all of us instead of just her.”

Rhyosyn stared at her.

Elowen’s breath went shallow.

Catrin leaned forward a fraction. “If we leave her, the Crown owns her. They can ask anything. They can twist her guilt until she confesses whatever they want. If we take her, she is not alone. She is not isolated. She is not a soft target.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes narrowed. “And if she breaks anyway.”

“Then she breaks with us watching,” Catrin said. “And we deal with it before it becomes a knife in our backs.”

Elowen swallowed. “You’re saying we bind her to keep her from being used against us.”

Catrin nodded. “Yes.”

Rhyosyn sat back slightly. “That is ruthless.”

“Yes,” Catrin agreed. “It has to be. Ruthless does not mean cruel. Ruthless means we don’t lie to ourselves.”

Silence again.

The stars turned slowly overhead. The Hearth-Ladle leaned toward the horizon. The Nail of the Sky held steady.

Rhyosyn’s gaze drifted toward Rowena. “She is young.”

“Eighteen,” Elowen said quietly. “Or close.”

Rhyosyn’s voice remained cool. “Old enough to choose. Young enough to panic.”

Catrin’s expression didn’t change. “Which is why we decide now, while she still has something left to hold onto.”

Elowen’s eyes flicked to the edge of the hollow, then back. “If we take her in, what does that look like.”

Catrin took a slow breath. “It looks like terms. It looks like rules. It looks like sisterhood, not sentiment.”

Rhyosyn’s lips pressed thin. “Rules can be broken.”

“Everything can be broken,” Catrin replied. “That doesn’t mean we stop building.”

Elowen exhaled. “Bring her here.”

Catrin looked at her. “Now.”

Elowen nodded once. “Now.”

Rhyosyn hesitated, then gave a single sharp nod. “Fine.”

Catrin shifted her weight and spoke toward Rowena without raising her voice.

“Rowena Stanton.”

The poncho near the deepest shadow moved. Rowena sat up slowly, as if every motion might offend. She kept her eyes down at first, then lifted them to Catrin’s face.

“Yes.”

“Come here,” Catrin said.

Rowena moved carefully across the hollow, stopping a few paces away. She did not kneel. She did not beg. She stood straight, shoulders tight, hands visible.

Her eyes were red-rimmed, but there were no tears on her cheeks.

She looked like someone who had already decided she deserved whatever came next.

Catrin studied her for a long moment. “You know why we’re speaking.”

“Yes,” Rowena said.

Rhyosyn’s voice was flat. “Say it.”

Rowena swallowed once. “I owe a blood debt.”

Elowen’s tone was quieter. “To whom.”

Rowena’s eyes flicked, briefly, toward where Al lay sleeping under the poncho. She looked away immediately, as if even glancing at him was a trespass.

“To you,” she said. “To him. To the women who bled on our land because I made a decision I thought would protect my household.”

Rhyosyn’s gaze sharpened. “Do you regret it.”

Rowena hesitated, then answered honestly. “I regret that it brought death. I do not regret that I tried to do right.”

Catrin nodded once. “Good.”

Rowena blinked, surprised.

Catrin’s voice remained steady. “If you had lied, there’d be no point in this conversation.”

Rhyosyn leaned forward slightly. “This isn’t about your feelings, Stanton. This is about whether you can hold your spine when the Crown squeezes.”

Rowena’s chin lifted a fraction. “I know.”

Elowen watched her carefully. “Do you understand what happens if we leave you behind.”

Rowena’s throat bobbed. “Yes.”

“Say it,” Rhyosyn demanded.

Rowena’s voice stayed level, but her hands trembled once before she forced them still. “The Crown takes me. They question me. They use me. And the blood debt follows you anyway.”

Catrin’s gaze held hers. “And if we take you with us.”

Rowena did not answer immediately. She looked down at the ground between them, then back up.

“Then my debt becomes yours,” she said. “And my life stops being my own.”

Elowen’s voice softened, but only slightly. “That is correct.”

Rowena nodded once. “I accept it.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes narrowed. “That was too fast.”

Rowena’s lips pressed together. “I’ve had all night to understand I ruined my house’s safety. I don’t get to negotiate.”

Catrin watched her for a long moment, then spoke.

“We are considering binding you into our sisterhood.”

Rowena’s eyes widened. She looked from Catrin to Elowen to Rhyosyn as if she’d misheard.

Rhyosyn’s voice was sharp. “Do not look grateful. This is not mercy.”

Rowena swallowed hard. “I understand.”

Elowen stepped forward slightly. “If we bring you in, you are ours. Not his.”

Rowena’s gaze flicked again, involuntarily, toward Al. She looked away even faster this time, cheeks heating with embarrassment.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Catrin’s voice remained calm. “Your loyalty is to us. You do not speak to outsiders without permission. You do not act alone. You do not leave camp without being seen.”

Rowena nodded.

Rhyosyn added, voice cold and precise. “If you break sisterhood, you lose protection. If you betray us, you will not survive the night. Do you understand.”

Rowena’s breath hitched once. She forced herself to meet Rhyosyn’s eyes.

“I understand.”

Elowen’s tone was firm. “And you will not claim him. Not in word. Not in rumor. Not in private expectation.”

Rowena’s face flushed a deeper red. “I wasn’t—”

Rhyosyn cut her off. “You will not.”

Rowena nodded quickly. “I will not.”

Catrin watched her closely. “Your blood debt becomes communal. That means we carry it. It also means you carry us.”

Rowena blinked. “How.”

“When the Crown asks,” Catrin said. “If they ever get their hands on you, your answers will protect the sisterhood first. Not your own guilt. Not your fear. Not your desire to atone.”

Rowena’s eyes trembled. “I don’t know if I can—”

Rhyosyn leaned in. “You can. Because if you can’t, you shouldn’t be breathing.”

Elowen shot Rhyosyn a glance. “Enough.”

Rhyosyn sat back, jaw tight, but she didn’t apologize.

Catrin held Rowena’s gaze. “Can you hold truth without giving them our throats.”

Rowena swallowed and nodded once. “Yes.”

Catrin studied her another moment. “Then speak the vow.”

Rowena hesitated. “I don’t know it.”

Elowen’s voice was low. “You do. Every girl is taught it. Whether she believes it or not.”

Rowena’s lips parted. Then she spoke, voice quiet and steady.

“Sisterhood before steel,” she said. “Sisterhood before crown. I will not raise my hand against my sisters. I will not speak their names to enemies. I will carry their burdens as they carry mine.”

The words sounded older than her.

Catrin nodded. Elowen’s expression softened by a hair. Rhyosyn’s eyes stayed hard, but she did not interrupt.

Rowena finished, voice barely above a whisper. “If I break this, let me be cast out. Let me be unmade. Let me be alone.”

Silence settled.

Catrin leaned forward slightly. “Do you mean it.”

Rowena met her eyes. “Yes.”

Elowen looked at Catrin. “If we do this, we cannot undo it.”

Catrin nodded once. “I know.”

Rhyosyn’s voice was clipped. “If she fails, we pay.”

Catrin answered. “We pay either way.”

Elowen exhaled slowly. “Then we choose the payment that buys strength.”

Catrin looked back at Rowena. “We accept you.”

Rowena’s breath broke. Not into tears. Into relief so sharp it almost looked like pain. She bowed her head once, quick and controlled.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Rhyosyn’s voice cut through it. “Don’t thank us. Earn it.”

Rowena nodded. “I will.”

Catrin gestured toward the ponchos. “Back under cover. You sleep. Elowen takes next watch after me.”

Rowena hesitated. “May I take a watch.”

Elowen’s mouth tightened. “Not tonight.”

Rhyosyn’s eyes narrowed. “You’re eager.”

Rowena’s cheeks flushed again. “I owe—”

Catrin cut her off. “You owe steadiness. Not martyrdom.”

Rowena nodded, then retreated back to her place, moving more smoothly now. Less like prey. More like a piece of the group.

Elowen watched her go. “We just made ourselves heavier.”

Catrin raised the monocular and returned her gaze to the dark. “We made ourselves harder to break.”

Rhyosyn was quiet for a long moment, then spoke, voice lower than before. “If the Crown takes one of us, they’ll try to use her to cut the rest.”

Catrin nodded. “Which is why we cannot be cut.”

Elowen pulled the poncho tighter around her shoulders. “What about him.”

Catrin didn’t look away from the horizon. “He is our path. Not our purpose.”

Rhyosyn’s voice was soft, almost reluctant. “He is also a weapon.”

“Yes,” Catrin said. “And weapons need hands that don’t tremble.”

They fell silent again, listening to the night.

Catrin swept the monocular slow, watching the green world for any movement that did not belong. The tripline lay quiet. The land lay quiet.

Behind her, Elowen settled back under cover, eyes still open but calmer. Rhyosyn leaned against a pack and closed her eyes for a moment, not sleeping, just resting.

Rowena lay in the deepest shadow, breathing carefully, as if afraid even her lungs might betray her.

No one smiled.

No one celebrated.

But something had changed.

They were no longer women moving beside each other out of circumstance.

They were a unit.

And in a world built to isolate and claim, that unity was the first act of defiance that mattered.

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Chapter Forty-Nine

CHAPTER 49

The morning broke cold and gray over the hollow. Al woke to the sound of nothing, which was the first sign something had changed.

No whispered arguments. No shifting weight. No careful breathing patterns of people pretending to sleep while actually watching each other.

He opened his eyes without moving, a habit learned in places where sudden movement invited bullets. The poncho lay over him like a second skin, damp with condensed breath and morning dew. Catrin sat at the lip of the hollow with her back to him, the monocular hanging loose from one hand. She wasn't scanning. She was thinking.

Al sat up slowly, folding the poncho with deliberate motions that announced he was awake without startling anyone. The others were already up. Elowen crouched near the packs, checking straps and buckles. Rhyosyn stood a few paces away, arms crossed, face unreadable in the gray light. Rowena sat between them, hands folded in her lap, spine straight.

No one looked at him directly, but he could feel their awareness of him, that constant peripheral attention that had become normal over the past weeks. In this world, men didn't exist unwatched. Ever. A man alone was either dead, escaped property, or about to be claimed by whoever found him first.

Al pulled on his boots, tied them, and stood. His knees protested briefly, then remembered how this worked. He rolled his shoulders once and moved toward the packs. "Morning," he said quietly.

Elowen glanced up, nodded once, and went back to the straps. Catrin turned her head slightly. "Morning." That was it. But the dynamic had shifted. He could feel it in the way they positioned themselves, in the subtle changes of posture and attention. Something had been decided while he slept.

Al paused, then crouched beside his own pack and began checking the load distribution. He worked in silence for a moment, then spoke without looking up. "Did something happen overnight?"

Catrin's voice was calm. "We had a conversation."

Al nodded once. "About what?"

"Us," she said. "The sisterhood. What that means going forward."

Al finished cinching a strap and sat back on his heels. He looked at her, then at the others. Elowen's hands stilled briefly. Rhyosyn's gaze remained fixed on the horizon. Rowena kept her eyes down, but her shoulders didn't hunch.

"All right," Al said.

Catrin turned to face him fully. "Rowena is part of the sisterhood now. Her debt is ours. Her choices are accountable to us, not to you." She paused, and her next words were careful but firm. "And you are ours. Not hers alone. Not any one of ours. All of ours."

Al held her gaze for a long moment, reading what she wasn't saying directly. In a world where men were rare enough to start wars over, where a single male birth could shift the balance of power between Houses, where unguarded men were seized by the first authority that found them, the women had just drawn a line. They were unified. They would not be divided over him. They would not compete. They would not tear each other apart for ownership rights that society expected them to fight over.

It was both a claim and a protection, and Al understood that. They were telling him-and telling each other-that he belonged to the group, not to any individual. That way, no one could be pressured to give him up. No one could be manipulated. No one could be turned against the others.

"Understood," he said quietly.

Elowen's hands resumed their work. Rhyosyn's expression didn't change, but something in her posture eased a fraction. Rowena exhaled quietly.

Catrin studied him for another beat, perhaps expecting resistance or resentment. When she found neither, she nodded once and turned back to the horizon. "We move in twenty minutes."

Al stood and shouldered his pack. "Where to?"

"West," Catrin said. "Deeper into the borderlands. Toward monster territory."

Al frowned slightly. "That's toward more danger, not less."

"That's the point," Elowen said. She stood and lifted her pack onto her shoulders with practiced efficiency. "You need levels. Combat experience. The System won't let you progress sitting in hiding."

"And the borderlands have what we need," Rhyosyn added. "Goblins, kobolds, occasional ogres. Creatures that will attack on sight, no politics involved."

Catrin's voice remained steady. "Out here, away from settlements and Crown authority, you can fight without drawing attention. Every kill means experience. Every level means you can summon larger weapons, use more of your American Magic."

Al considered that. His summoning ability was still limited-he could manage his sidearms reliably now, and small tools like the flashlight and monocular. But the full rifle he wanted, the weapon that would give him real reach and stopping power, remained beyond the System's current volume restrictions. He needed to level up. And leveling required combat.

But combat in human settlements meant witnesses, questions, political complications. Out here in the rough country, they could operate without scrutiny.

"How long until we're in prime hunting ground?" he asked.

"Two days if we push," Elowen replied. "Three if we're careful."

"We're careful until we need to be fast," Catrin said. "The feud is still active. We can't afford to be predictable."

They broke camp methodically. Al retrieved the tripline, coiling it carefully. Elowen buried the shallow scrapes they'd dug for waste. Rhyosyn swept the site with branches, breaking up footprints and drag marks. Rowena helped without being asked, moving quietly, efficiently, learning the rhythms of a group that had been forced to operate like a military unit.

Catrin led them out of the hollow in single file, spacing them far enough apart that a single ambush couldn't take them all. Al walked second, directly behind Catrin. Rowena came third, then Elowen, with Rhyosyn bringing up the rear. The positioning was deliberate-Al surrounded, protected, controlled. Unable to move independently. Unable to be separated from the group.

He didn't complain. In this world, that formation kept him alive. It also kept the women alive. A man traveling with insufficient escort reflected badly on the women responsible for him. It suggested weakness, poverty, or criminal negligence. In extreme cases, it could result in the women being stripped of custody and the man being seized by Crown authorities "for his own protection."

No one questioned the order. No one needed to.

They moved through scrub and low grass, following game trails and dry creek beds. The land rolled gently here, not quite hills, not quite plains. Enough cover to move unseen. Not enough to hide an army. Al kept his breathing steady and his eyes moving. Watch the tree line. Check the high ground. Note the wind direction. Old habits from a different war, but habits didn't care about context.

The System notification sat at the edge of his awareness like a bruise he couldn't stop pressing.

[Feud State: Active][Proximity Events: 0][Balance: Maintained]

It had appeared three days ago, quiet and clinical, with no fanfare. No quest prompt. No dramatic proclamation. Just a status update that refused to dismiss. Al had tried ignoring it. That hadn't worked. The notification didn't pulse or flash. It simply existed, patient and immovable, like a debt collector who knew you'd answer eventually.

He'd asked Catrin if she saw anything. She'd looked at him like he'd grown a second head. The System didn't share feud markers with uninvolved parties. That was the point. Even his own fiancées-his legal guardians in the eyes of society-couldn't see what hunted him.

So Al walked through a world that looked normal while wearing a target no one else could see.

They reached a low ridge by midmorning. Catrin signaled a halt and they crouched in the shadow of a tilted boulder. She glassed the valley below with the monocular, taking her time. Al drank from his canteen and watched the ridgeline behind them. Nothing moved. The grass bent in the wind. Birds wheeled overhead, unbothered.

It felt wrong. Not because something was there. Because nothing was.

They'd been traveling for three days since leaving Stanton lands, and they hadn't encountered a single patrol, caravan, or other travelers. That didn't happen. Even out here in the borderlands, there should be some traffic. Hunters. Scouts. Other groups moving between settlements.

Instead, nothing. As if the land had been cleared.

"Movement," Catrin said quietly. She adjusted the monocular. "Two miles south. Looks like kobolds. Six, maybe eight individuals."

Al moved beside her and she handed him the monocular. He pressed it to his eye-the familiar weight of government-issue gear, summoned from memory and will-and swept the indicated area. There. Low shapes moving through the scrub with the efficient, purposeful gait of hunters or scouts.

Kobolds. Roughly humanoid, scaled, carrying spears and what looked like crude shields.

"They're ranging," he said. "Checking territory. Could be headed our way."

Catrin nodded. "We could avoid them. Circle north, stay out of their patrol pattern."

"Or," Rhyosyn said quietly, "we could use them."

Everyone looked at her.

She gestured at Al. "He needs combat experience. Those kobolds are isolated, manageable numbers, and we have terrain advantage from this ridge."

Elowen frowned. "That's a risk. Kobolds fight smart. They don't panic easily."

"Which makes them good training," Catrin said slowly. She looked at Al. "You've fought before. You know how to use your weapons. But have you fought *here*? In this world, with the System watching?"

Al shook his head. "Not really. A couple of skirmishes during the escape. Nothing sustained."

Catrin was quiet for a moment, weighing options. Then she nodded. "We do it. We set up a kill zone on this ridge, draw them in, and Al takes the engagement. We provide overwatch and backup."

"I'll need room to operate," Al said. "If I'm summoning weapons mid-fight, I need space and concentration."

"You'll have it," Catrin promised. She turned to the others. "Elowen, you and Rowena set up on the north flank. Rhyosyn, south flank. I'll stay central with Al. If anything goes wrong, we collapse inward and extract."

They moved into position with practiced efficiency. Al found a spot behind a weathered boulder that gave him cover and a clear field of fire down the slope. He checked his sidearms-both M1911s materialized smoothly now, the familiar weight settling into his hands. He'd practiced the summoning enough that it came almost automatically, though it still cost him focus and left him slightly winded.

The kobolds were closer now, their patrol pattern bringing them toward the ridge. They moved with military discipline, spacing themselves, checking sight lines. These weren't mindless monsters. They were trained.

"Contact in two minutes," Catrin whispered from beside him. "Remember-you don't need to kill them all. Just engage, survive, and gain

experience. We're here if it goes sideways."

Al nodded, settling his breathing. The familiar pre-combat calm descended. He'd done this before. Different world, different enemy, but the fundamentals were the same. Identify targets. Control breathing. Fire with purpose.

The lead kobold crested a small rise fifty yards out.

Al sighted down the pistol, exhaled slowly, and squeezed the trigger.

The shot cracked across the morning air. The kobold jerked and went down.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then the remaining kobolds scattered, seeking cover with impressive speed. One barked orders in a guttural language. Another readied a spear.

They'd found the fight they were looking for.

Al fired again, tracking a kobold as it dove behind a rock. The System chimed faintly at the edge of his awareness-experience gained, but not enough yet for a level.

A spear arced through the air toward him. He ducked behind the boulder as it clattered against stone.

This was going to be harder than he thought.

But as he leaned out and fired again, dropping another kobold, he felt something shift. The System was watching. Learning. Measuring him against this world's standards.

He just needed to prove he could survive them.

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Chapter Fifty

CHAPTER 50

The kobold fight lasted eight minutes.

Al dropped three of them in the first exchange, his pistol work clean and efficient. The remaining five adapted fast—taking cover, coordinating movements, one attempting to flank while others provided covering fire with slings and thrown spears. They were professionals, not monsters, and they fought like soldiers who understood terrain and tactics.

Catrin took down two more with her crossbow when they tried to rush Al's position. Rhyosyn engaged another that broke through the perimeter. The last two retreated in good order, dragging one wounded companion with them, disappearing into the scrub before anyone could pursue.

Al lowered his pistol, breathing hard. The System notification chimed quietly.

[Combat Concluded] [Experience Gained: 340] [Level Progress: 67%] [Summoning Capacity: Unchanged]

Not enough. He'd need at least two more engagements like that before he could level and increase his summoning volume. The rifle remained out of reach.

"You fought well," Catrin said, checking her crossbow string. "Clean shots. Good discipline under pressure."

"They were better than I expected," Al replied. He dismissed the pistols and felt the faint drain as the System reclaimed them. "Military training. Unit cohesion. They weren't just raiding—they were patrolling."

Elowen moved down from her position, Rowena following close behind. "Which means there's a larger group nearby. Probably a settlement or forward camp."

Rhyosyn finished checking the fallen kobolds for anything useful—weapons, tools, insignia. She found a carved wooden token on one body, marked with clan symbols. "This is kobold work. We're in their hunting territory now."

Catrin studied the token, then looked west toward the distant tree line. "We keep moving. If there's a kobold settlement ahead, we go around it. We're not here to start a war."

They broke contact and continued west, moving faster now. The terrain grew rougher as the afternoon wore on—more broken stone, deeper gullies, scattered stands of twisted trees that looked like they'd been tortured by wind. The grass gave way to scrub and exposed rock.

By evening they found a defensible hollow and made camp without fire. They ate cold rations and set watch rotations. Al took the first shift, sitting at the lip of the hollow with his summoned flashlight off but ready.

The stars came out overhead, unfamiliar constellations in a sky he still didn't fully understand. He'd been in this world for weeks now, and sometimes it still felt like dreaming—the weight of the System in his mind, the knowledge that his very existence violated the natural order, the constant awareness of being watched, hunted, and valued all at once.

The System notification pulsed once, unexpected.

[Feud State: Active] [Proximity Event: Logged] [Distance: 4.2 km] [Threshold: Not Met] [Action: Denied]

Al's pulse quickened. Someone was out there. Four kilometers away—about two and a half miles. Close enough for the System to register. Far enough that they weren't in immediate danger.

But they were being followed.

He didn't wake the others immediately. No point in disrupting rest cycles for something that wasn't an immediate threat. But he stayed alert, watching the darkness, listening for any sound that didn't belong.

An hour into his watch, Catrin emerged from under her poncho and moved to sit beside him. She didn't ask if something was wrong—she just waited, patient and ready.

"Feud marker," Al said quietly. "Logged about an hour ago. Four klicks south."

"Following us," Catrin said. Not a question.

"Yeah."

She was quiet for a moment, then spoke carefully. "Can you tell if they're marked to kill you or protect you?"

Al shook his head. "System doesn't specify. Just logs proximity and enforces balance."

"So somewhere behind us," Catrin said slowly, "there's someone who either wants you dead or wants to keep you alive. And we don't know which."

"That about covers it," Al agreed.

They sat in silence, watching the southern horizon. Nothing moved. The darkness remained absolute and empty. But the knowledge of that distant presence changed everything—turned the peaceful night into a waiting game, the empty land into a board where pieces moved according to rules they couldn't see.

"The west gets more dangerous the deeper we go," Catrin said finally. "Kobolds. Goblins. Worse things. The non-humans don't recognize human law. They won't honor the feud because they don't understand it."

"Meaning what," Al asked.

"Meaning if we're deep enough in hostile territory, whoever's following us will have to worry about more than just us," Catrin replied. "Goblins attack humans on sight. They don't negotiate. They don't parley. They just defend their ground."

Al considered that. "So we use the goblins as a barrier. Go deep enough that pursuit becomes suicide."

"It's not a perfect plan," Catrin admitted. "We'll be in just as much danger as they are. But at least we'll be moving, choosing our ground. They'll be following blind into territory that wants them dead."

"How far west until we hit goblin lands proper," Al asked.

"Two days," Catrin said. "Maybe three. The borderlands transition slowly. First you see signs—markers, old battlefields, places where humans stopped settling. Then you start seeing watchers. Then they stop watching and start hunting."

"And we need to be ready to fight the whole way," Al finished.

"Yes," Catrin said. She looked at him directly. "You need more levels. More experience. We need to hunt aggressively while we can, before the terrain becomes so hostile that every fight is a risk we can't afford."

Al nodded slowly. "Then we hunt tomorrow. Push hard. Find something worth fighting."

"Agreed," Catrin said. She returned to her bedroll, but she didn't close her eyes immediately. She lay there watching the stars, processing, planning.

Al remained at his post, counting the hours until dawn.

They broke camp before first light and moved west in the predawn darkness, using Al's flashlight sparingly to navigate broken ground. The pace was punishing—fast enough to gain distance but controlled enough not to injure anyone on the rough terrain. No one complained.

The sun rose behind them, painting the grassland in shades of amber and gold. The land opened up ahead, rolling away toward distant hills. The grass grew taller here, wilder, and the air smelled different—less cultivated, more primal.

Catrin called a brief halt at midmorning. They drank water, checked their gear, and scanned the surrounding terrain. Al glassed the area behind them with the monocular.

And there they were.

Two figures, perhaps two miles back, moving parallel to their course. One on foot, one mounted on what looked like a riding drake—a six-legged reptilian creature used as cavalry in this world. They weren't trying to hide. They weren't rushing to close the distance. They were just... there. Maintaining contact. Staying in range.

"Contact," Al said quietly. "Two miles, our six. Two individuals. One mounted."

Catrin took the monocular and studied them. After a long moment, she lowered it and her expression was grim. "The mounted one just stopped. She's not following anymore."

"Which means what," Rowena asked, her voice tight.

"Means one of them is marked to kill," Rhyosyn said flatly. "The other is marked to protect. And they just separated so we don't know which is which."

Elowen stared at the distant figures. "How is that possible? How can they coordinate if they're on opposite sides?"

"They can't," Catrin said. "Not directly. But they both know the rules. They both know the System is watching. So they improvise around it." She looked at Al. "The one still following is the active threat. The one who stopped is waiting to see what happens."

Al processed that. "So if I die, the protector moves in to... what? Claim my body? Report it? Avenge me?"

"Something like that," Catrin replied. "The System logs everything. Both sides need proof of what happened."

They resumed walking, faster now. The figure behind them matched their pace, staying always at the edge of visibility. Not gaining. Not falling back. Just present, like a debt that refused to be dismissed.

The System notification pulsed intermittently as the distance fluctuated.

[Proximity Event: Maintained] [Distance: Variable] [Threshold: Evaluating]

An hour later, the mounted figure began moving again. Not toward them—parallel, angling to intercept their path to the west. Trying to cut them off from deeper wilderness.

"She's boxing us," Al said, tracking the movement. "Trying to force us south, away from the roughest terrain."

Catrin swore quietly. "The one on foot is still following. So now we have pursuit from behind and a mobile blocker ahead."

"They're working together," Elowen said, disbelief in her voice. "Even though they're on opposite sides."

"No," Rhyosyn corrected. "They're both following the same rules. The rules create the cooperation without them ever speaking."

It was brilliant, in a terrible way. Two enemies bound by the same invisible law, moving in concert without coordination, herding their target toward whatever conditions would finally satisfy the System's threshold for action.

"We can't outrun a mounted rider," Catrin said. "And if we turn south, we're moving away from the wilderness."

"So we push through," Al said. He checked his sidearms, making sure they'd manifest cleanly when needed. "Straight west. If the rider moves to block us, we engage."

"That's exactly what they want," Rhyosyn said. "Force a confrontation in open ground where they have advantage."

"We don't have good options," Catrin replied. "Only less bad ones." She looked at each of them. "Tight formation. Al in the center. If combat starts, we extract immediately. No heroics. No standing and fighting. We punch through and run."

They moved out, pushing harder now. The mounted figure adjusted course, clearly tracking them. The figure on foot began closing distance, moving faster.

The hills drew closer. Three miles. Two. One.

The System notification pulsed.

[Feud State: Active] [Proximity Events: 2] [Distance: Converging] [Threshold: Approaching]

"They're timing it," Al said, his voice tight. "They're both moving to hit us at the same moment."

"Before we reach the hills," Catrin finished. She drew her sword. "Stay close. Stay moving."

Half a mile to rougher terrain.

The mounted figure broke into a gallop, the drake's six legs eating up ground with terrifying speed. The figure on foot began running, closing from behind.

Quarter mile.

And then, without warning, the mounted rider stopped. Just... stopped. Pulled up short fifty yards ahead of them, the drake snorting and pawing the ground.

The figure on foot stopped too, maybe a hundred yards behind.

Both of them frozen. Waiting.

The System notification flashed.

[Feud State: Active] [Proximity: Critical] [Threshold: Not Met] [Action: Denied] [Evaluation: Ongoing]

"Keep moving," Catrin hissed. "Don't stop. Don't engage."

They walked forward, maintaining their pace. Al could see the mounted figure now—a woman in her thirties, wearing road leathers, carrying a cavalry saber. Her face was hard, professional, and her eyes tracked Al with the fixed intensity of a cat watching a bird through glass.

She didn't move. Didn't draw the saber. Didn't speak.

Her body language screamed violence held in check by invisible chains.

They walked past her. Twenty yards. Ten. Five.

Al was close enough to see the cords of muscle standing out on her neck as she fought against whatever invisible force held her. Close enough to see her hand trembling on the drake's reins.

She turned her head, tracking him as they passed.

Her lips moved, forming a single word without sound.

Soon.

They kept walking. Behind them, the figure on foot remained motionless. The mounted woman didn't follow.

They reached the hills and pushed into rougher country—broken stone, narrow defiles, scattered vegetation. The kind of terrain that would slow

pursuit and favor defenders.

The System notification pulsed once more.

[Feud State: Active] [Proximity Events: Logged] [Distance: Increasing] [Balance: Maintained]

They walked deeper into the hills, putting distance and obstacles between themselves and the watchers. The mounted woman remained visible for a few minutes longer, a dark silhouette against the grassland, before distance and terrain finally hid her from view.

"They'll follow," Elowen said quietly. "Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But they'll follow."

"Let them," Catrin replied. "Every mile west is a mile deeper into hostile territory. The goblins don't care about human feuds. They'll attack whoever crosses their ground."

Al looked back once, but the pursuers were gone from sight.

Not gone.

Just waiting.

Following the same invisible rules, bound by the same System constraints, moving inexorably toward whatever moment would finally satisfy the threshold for violence.

And Al had no idea when that moment would come.

Only that it was getting closer with every step.

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Chapter Fifty-One

CHAPTER 51

They found the old ruin on the second day in the hills, stumbling across it while searching for a defensible camp site. It sat in a narrow valley, hidden from casual view by the terrain—a circle of standing stones twice the height of a man, arranged around a central platform of fitted blocks. The stones themselves were covered in carvings, symbols and script in a language Al didn't recognize, worn smooth by centuries of weather.

The entire site radiated wrongness. Not evil, exactly. Just... old. Ancient in a way that made the System feel young by comparison.

"What is this place," Rowena whispered.

Elowen moved closer to examine the carvings, her expression troubled. "Pre-Binding site. These symbols predate the Triumvirate, predate most of the current Houses." She traced one symbol with her finger. "Religious site, maybe. Or something older. Places where power was bound before the System rose to organize it."

Al stepped into the circle and immediately felt the difference. The constant pressure of the System—that awareness in the back of his mind, the notifications and status updates and omnipresent observation—suddenly... lessened. Not gone, but muted. Like someone had turned down the volume.

The System notification flickered.

[Location Recognized: Pre-Binding Site] [System Authority: Limited] [Observation: Reduced] [Feud State: Obscured]

"The feud markers," Al said slowly. "They're not showing clearly anymore."

Catrin moved to stand beside him, studying his face. "What do you mean."

"I mean the System can't track it properly here," Al replied. "The proximity logs, the threshold evaluations—they're all fuzzy. Uncertain." He looked around at the ancient stones. "This place is older than the rules."

Rhyosyn gripped her weapon tighter. "Is that good or bad."

"I don't know," Al admitted. "But it means whoever's following us can't track me as precisely here. The System won't tell them exactly where I am."

They made camp inside the stone circle, reasoning that if the System's authority was limited here, they'd at least have warning before anyone could get close. The stones provided some windbreak, and the valley's walls would force any approach to funnel through predictable routes.

As darkness fell, they set watch rotations. Al took the first shift, sitting near one of the standing stones, his back to the carved surface. The symbols seemed to pulse faintly in his peripheral vision, as if they were alive and reacting to his presence.

He was two hours into watch when he heard the sound.

Not human movement. Something else. Lower. More guttural.

Breathing.

Al reached for his flashlight but didn't activate it yet. Instead, he focused on the sound, trying to locate it. There—near the valley entrance. Multiple sources. Moving with coordination.

He woke the others with a touch and a gesture. They came alert silently, hands moving to weapons. Catrin took position beside him, listening.

"Goblins," she whispered. "At least six. Maybe more."

"They found us," Rhyosyn said, her voice barely audible.

"Or we're in their territory," Elowen replied. "These hills are contested ground. No human settlements for miles. The goblins claim it, and they don't negotiate."

The sounds grew closer. Footsteps on stone. The scrape of metal on rock. Low voices speaking in a language Al couldn't understand—harsh, guttural, but clearly communicating strategy and coordination.

Then they appeared at the valley entrance—eight goblins, armed with spears and crude swords, wearing leather armor marked with clan symbols. They moved into the valley with military precision, spacing themselves, covering angles.

They saw the humans immediately and stopped. For a long moment, neither side moved. The goblins assessed the situation—five humans, defensive position, clearly armed. Not easy prey.

The lead goblin—a female, larger than the others, with scars across her face and arms—barked something in her language. The others spread out further, beginning to encircle the stone circle.

"They're not leaving," Catrin said quietly. "This is their ground. We're trespassing."

"Can we negotiate," Rowena asked.

"They don't speak Common," Elowen replied. "And even if they did, goblins don't negotiate with humans. We killed their people in the expansion wars. Burned their villages. Claimed their lands. They remember."

The goblins completed their encirclement. Eight of them now surrounded the stone circle, spears leveled, ready.

The lead goblin barked another command.

"They're going to attack," Catrin said. "Get ready."

Al summoned both pistols, feeling them materialize in his hands. He'd been practicing the manifestation enough that it came smoothly now, though it still cost him focus. "Rules of engagement?"

"Defend ourselves," Catrin said. "If we can drive them off without killing them all, that's preferable. But if it's us or them—"

"Understood," Al replied.

The goblins charged.

They came in coordinated waves—two from the front, two from each flank, two hanging back with ranged weapons. Professional tactics. These weren't raiders or bandits. They were soldiers defending their territory.

Al fired at the nearest goblin, aiming for center mass. The shot caught her in the chest and she went down hard. He shifted target, fired again, dropped another.

Catrin's crossbow sang, taking down a third. Rhyosyn engaged the flankers with her blade, her movements precise and economical. Elowen covered Rowena, who was fighting with desperate efficiency, every motion driven by the knowledge that capture meant death or worse.

The fight was brutal and short. Goblins were tough, disciplined, and fearless, but they were outmatched by a group that included a man who could manifest weapons from thin air and women who'd been trained by the Triumvirate's military.

When it was over, five goblins lay dead. Three had retreated, melting back into the darkness beyond the valley.

Al breathed hard, his hands shaking slightly from adrenaline and exertion. The System notification chimed.

[Combat Concluded] [Experience Gained: 520] [Level Progress: 124%] [Level Increased] [Summoning Capacity: Expanded]

Power flooded through him—subtle but unmistakable. He felt the volume restrictions loosen, felt his ability to manifest objects expand. He focused inward, checking the parameters.

The rifle. He could summon it now. Not perfectly—the System's visual showed it would require significant concentration and drain him more than the pistols—but it was possible. He'd crossed the threshold.

"You leveled," Catrin said, studying his expression.

"Yeah," Al confirmed. "I can manifest the rifle now."

"Show me," she said.

Al holstered the pistols and focused. He pictured the M4—the standard service rifle he'd carried for years, the weapon that felt like an extension of his body. He reached for it through the System, feeling the resistance, the cost in will and concentration.

The rifle materialized in his hands. Solid. Real. Familiar weight and balance. The System's interpretation was perfect—every detail correct, from the carry handle to the magazine well.

It felt like coming home.

"How long can you maintain it," Catrin asked.

Al checked the System's feedback. "Maybe ten minutes of active use before I'm too drained to function. Longer if I'm just carrying it without firing." He dismissed it and felt the relief as the drain stopped. "I'll need to be careful about when I summon it. Can't afford to be exhausted before a fight even starts."

"But you have it when you need it," Catrin said. "That changes things."

They finished checking the fallen goblins—looking for anything useful, making sure none were playing dead. Elowen found more clan markers, different from the ones they'd seen before.

"These goblins are from a different clan than the kobolds we fought yesterday," she said. "We're moving through contested territory. Multiple groups claim these lands."

"Which means we'll keep running into patrols," Rhyosyn said. "Every clan will see us as invaders."

Catrin looked around the stone circle. "We can't stay here. The survivors will bring reinforcements. We need to move."

"In the dark?" Rowena asked.

"We have light," Catrin said, gesturing at Al. "And moving is safer than staying in a known position."

They gathered their gear quickly and left the valley, Al's flashlight illuminating the path ahead. They moved for two hours through rough country, putting distance between themselves and the ambush site.

As they walked, Al thought about the stone circle. The way the System's authority had weakened there. The way the feud markers had become unclear.

Old places. Pre-Binding sites. Locations where the current order didn't have full control.

If he could find more of them, he'd have temporary sanctuary. Places where the System couldn't precisely track him, where whoever was following would lose his trail.

But those places would also be dangerous. If the System's authority was limited, its protection was limited too. The rules that kept the feud balanced might not apply.

It was a trade—safety from the feud for vulnerability to everything else.

The notification pulsed faintly.

[Feud State: Active] [Proximity Events: Unknown] [System Observation: Resumed] [Balance: Maintained]

They were back in normal territory. The System could see them again. Track them. Log their position.

Which meant whoever was following could track them too.

"We need to find civilization," Elowen said as they walked. "A settlement. A trade post. Somewhere with people and walls."

"Human settlement means questions," Rhyosyn replied. "Questions about why we're here. Questions about him." She gestured at Al. "Questions we can't answer without drawing attention."

"And staying in the wilderness means fighting every day," Catrin said. "Against goblins, kobolds, whatever else claims these lands. We're gaining experience, yes. But we're also getting worn down."

They were quiet for a moment, the weight of impossible choices pressing down.

Finally, Al spoke. "How far to the nearest human outpost?"

"Three days," Catrin said. "Maybe four. There's a fortified waystation at the edge of the claimed territories. Military presence. Regular patrols. The kind of place where the Crown's authority is absolute."

"And where your feud markers will work without interference," Elowen added, looking at Al.

"But also where the Crown will see you," Rhyosyn said. "Where they'll know exactly who you are and where you are."

Al considered that. The Crown wanted him. Various Houses wanted him. The Blood Feud wanted him dead or protected, depending on which side you asked. And now he was learning that old places—pre-System sites—responded to him differently than they did to others.

Every choice led to danger. The only question was which danger he could manage.

"We go to the waystation," he said finally. "I need more information. I need to understand what's happening with the feud, with these old sites, with whatever the System is trying to classify me as." He looked at Catrin. "And I need to do it before the System decides I'm more valuable dead than alive."

Catrin nodded slowly. "Then we go. But carefully. And we prepare for the possibility that we're walking into a trap."

"Everything's a trap," Al replied. "We just have to decide which one we spring on our own terms."

They walked through the night, moving east now, back toward human territory and whatever awaited them there.

Behind them, in the hills, goblins regrouped and reported to their clans that humans had violated their territory and killed their warriors.

Behind them, two figures resumed their pursuit, the System's notifications clear and precise once more, tracking their prey across terrain where the old rules applied and violence waited only for permission.

And ahead of them, the waystation sat at the edge of civilization, a place where human law was absolute and the Blood Feud would resume its patient, inexorable evaluation.

Al checked the distance in his mind. Three days.

Three days to get stronger.

Three days to understand what he was becoming.

Three days before the System decided if he was property, weapon, or something else entirely.

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Chapter Fifty-Two

CHAPTER 52

They traveled east for a day and a half, moving through rough country that gradually softened into something more recognizable as borderland territory. The wild scrub gave way to occasional cleared areas. Old road markers appeared, weathered and tilted but still visible. Signs of human presence, even if that presence was sparse and cautious.

The feud notifications had resumed their normal pattern after they'd left the stone circle. Regular proximity logs. Threshold evaluations. The two figures behind them maintaining their patient pursuit, always just at the edge of System awareness.

[Feud State: Active] [Proximity Events: 2] [Distance: 3.8 km] [Threshold: Not Met] [Balance: Maintained]

Al had stopped checking the notification constantly. It was always there, unchanging, a background hum of potential violence that never quite materialized. Like tinnitus—constant, aggravating, impossible to ignore once you noticed it.

They made camp on the second night in a shallow ravine that provided some cover from wind and observation. Catrin allowed a small fire this time—they were close enough to human territory that smoke wouldn't automatically draw hostile non-humans, and far enough from the main roads that Crown patrols wouldn't investigate immediately.

Al sat near the fire, cleaning his pistols with a cloth he'd summoned for the purpose. The weapons didn't actually need cleaning—the System manifested them in perfect condition every time—but the ritual was soothing. Familiar. Something from his old life that still made sense in this one.

Elowen sat across from him, sketching in her journal by firelight. She'd been recording their journey—routes, landmarks, encounters. The kind of intelligence gathering that would be valuable if they ever needed to travel this way again.

Or if anyone ever needed to follow their path.

"The waystation," Elowen said without looking up from her sketching. "What do you plan to do when we get there?"

Al reassembled the first pistol and set it aside. "Depends on who's there. If it's just standard garrison, we resupply and move on. If there's anyone who understands feud law..." He trailed off.

"You want answers," Elowen finished.

"I want to understand the rules," Al corrected. "Right now I'm playing a game where I can't see the board, don't know the win conditions, and the referee only speaks when it's too late to matter."

Elowen's pencil paused. "That's the System for everyone. We all live by rules we don't fully understand."

"But most people aren't being hunted by those rules," Al replied. He started on the second pistol. "Most people know their place in the structure. They know what's expected. What's permitted. I don't have that."

"Because you're foreign," Rowena said quietly. She'd been sitting at the edge of the firelight, listening. "The System doesn't know what to do with you. So it watches and waits."

Al nodded. "And while it's watching, the feud keeps building pressure. Sooner or later, something's going to give."

Catrin emerged from the darkness beyond the fire, returning from a patrol of their perimeter. She settled beside Rhyosyn and accepted a water skin. "We should reach the waystation by midday tomorrow. Assuming we don't run into complications."

"We always run into complications," Rhyosyn muttered.

"Complications are preferable to catastrophes," Catrin replied. She looked at Al. "When we get there, I do the talking. You stay visible but quiet. We present as a noble retinue escorting valuable property—which is what we are in the eyes of any Crown authority."

Al's jaw tightened but he nodded. The reminder always stung, but he understood the necessity. "Understood."

"If there's anyone there who specializes in feud law, they'll likely be military or judicial," Catrin continued. "Those officials answer to the Crown, not to Houses. They might be more objective."

"Or more dangerous," Elowen said. "If the Crown decides Al is too valuable or too disruptive to leave in private hands, they'll seize him regardless of our claims."

"Then we don't give them reason to decide that," Catrin said firmly. "We're quiet, respectful, and we leave as soon as we have what we need."

They settled into watch rotations. Al took the last shift before dawn, sitting at the ravine's edge with the rifle across his lap. He'd summoned it earlier to test the drain—five minutes of holding it manifested had left him winded and slightly nauseated. He'd need to be careful about when he called it. It was a finishing weapon, not a patrol tool.

The stars wheeled overhead. The fire burned down to coals. And behind them, somewhere in the darkness, two figures maintained their vigil.

They found the old road shortly after dawn. Not the waystation road—something older, more overgrown. It cut across their path heading north-south, the paving stones still visible beneath decades of accumulated soil and vegetation.

Elowen stopped at the road's edge and crouched, examining the stonework. "This is old. Pre-Triumvirate construction. You can tell by the way the blocks are fitted." She traced the gaps between stones with her finger. "No mortar. Just precision cutting and weight."

"A road to where," Rhyosyn asked.

Elowen pointed north, where the road disappeared into rising terrain. "That direction leads to the old highlands. Before the Triumvirate consolidated power, there were settlements up there. Small kingdoms, independent holds. Most were absorbed or abandoned centuries ago."

"And south," Catrin asked.

"Toward the coast," Elowen replied. "But this road predates the coastal cities. It must have connected to something else. Something that doesn't exist anymore."

Al studied the road, feeling something familiar prickle at the back of his mind. The same sensation he'd felt at the stone circle. That sense of age, of power that predated the current order.

He stepped onto the ancient paving stones.

The System notification flickered immediately.

[Location Recognized: Ancient Transit Route] [System Authority: Reduced] [Historical Classification: Pre-Binding Infrastructure] [Observation: Limited]

"It's another old place," Al said quietly. "The System doesn't have full authority here."

Catrin frowned. "It's just a road."

"It's a road that predates the System," Elowen corrected. She stood and brushed dirt from her hands. "These transit routes were how people moved before the System standardized everything. Before the Triumvirate enforced Crown roads and toll systems. This road exists outside that structure."

Al walked a few paces north along the ancient route. With each step, the System's presence in his mind diminished slightly. Not gone—never completely gone—but muted. Quieter. The feud notifications became fuzzy, imprecise.

He looked back at the others. "If we follow this north, whoever's tracking me will lose precision. The System can't log my position as accurately on old infrastructure."

"But it also means we're not going to the waystation," Catrin said. "We're going into abandoned territory. No supplies. No information. No support."

"But no feud," Al replied. "At least not with System enforcement."

They stood at the crossroads—literal and figurative. East toward the waystation, Crown authority, and whatever answers or dangers waited there. North along the old road toward abandoned highlands where the System's grip was weak and the feud might not follow.

Rhyosyn voiced what they were all thinking. "If we go north, we don't know what we'll find. These highlands were abandoned for a reason."

"Everything was abandoned for a reason," Elowen said. "Usually the same reason—the Triumvirate couldn't hold it, so they withdrew and declared it worthless." She looked at the road. "But worthless to the Triumvirate doesn't mean empty. It just means outside their control."

Al felt the pull of the old road. Something about it felt... right. Like it was meant for him. Like walking it would answer questions he didn't know how to ask.

"How far north before we hit the highlands proper," he asked.

Elowen consulted her mental map. "Half a day on foot. Maybe less if this road is as direct as it looks."

"And if there's nothing there," Catrin said. "No settlement, no supplies, no answers. Just ruins."

"Then we turn around and head for the waystation," Al replied. "But I need to know. I need to understand why these old places affect me differently."

Catrin was quiet for a long moment, weighing options. Finally, she nodded. "We go north. But we don't commit beyond reconnaissance. If it's

just empty ruins, we turn back immediately."

They turned north, following the ancient road into rising terrain. The land changed as they climbed—less gentle hills, more broken stone and steep grades. The vegetation thinned, replaced by hardy scrub that clung to rocky soil.

And the System's presence continued to fade with each mile.

[System Authority: Minimal] [Observation: Severely Limited] [Feud State: Unverifiable] [Location: Outside Standard Jurisdiction]

Al had never felt so disconnected from the System. It was still there—he could still sense it at the edge of his awareness—but it was distant now. Weak. Like a radio signal fading in and out.

"Anyone else feeling this," he asked.

The women exchanged glances. "Feeling what," Catrin said.

"The System," Al replied. "It's... quiet. Like someone turned down the volume."

"I don't feel any different," Elowen said. The others shook their heads.

Al realized with a chill that this wasn't affecting everyone. Just him. The System's authority was weaker here for everyone, perhaps. But it was nearly silent for him specifically.

Why.

They crested a ridge and stopped.

Below them, nestled in a mountain valley, lay ruins.

Not collapsed buildings or scattered stones. Intact structures—weathered, overgrown, but still standing. A town, maybe. Or a fortress. Walls still rose twenty feet high in places. Towers stood watch over empty streets. And at the center, a large building with a distinctive architecture—pillared entrance, stepped roof, deliberate symmetry.

"What is that place," Rowena whispered.

Elowen stared at it, her expression troubled. "I don't know. It's not in any record I've seen. If this was a major settlement, there should be some mention in the histories."

"Unless someone wanted it forgotten," Rhyosyn said quietly.

They descended into the valley cautiously, weapons ready, watching for any sign of occupation. But the ruins remained silent. Empty. Only wind moved through the ancient streets.

As they approached the central building, Al felt something change. The air grew heavier. Warmer. The hairs on his arms stood up.

And the System notification flickered back to life, but different than before.

[Location Recognized: Sovereign Hold] [Historical Classification: RESTRICTED] [Lineage Authority: Evaluating] [System Override: Pending] [Warning: Entering Judgment Site]

"Stop," Al said sharply. The others froze.

"What is it," Catrin asked.

"The System just woke up," Al replied. "And it's not happy. It's calling this place a 'Sovereign Hold' and a 'Judgment Site.'" He looked at the building. "Whatever this place is, it's important. Important enough that the System is overriding its own restrictions to monitor it."

Elowen moved closer to the building, studying the architecture. She stopped at the entrance, staring at a symbol carved above the doorway. Her face went pale.

"Catrin," she said, her voice barely audible. "You need to see this."

They gathered at the entrance. Above the doorway, carved into stone that had survived centuries, was a symbol Al had never seen before but somehow recognized instantly.

A serpent coiled around a crown. Wings spread wide. Eyes that seemed to follow the viewer.

"That's not possible," Catrin whispered. "That symbol was banned. Erased from all official records."

"What is it," Al asked.

Elowen turned to look at him, her expression a mixture of fear and wonder. "It's the crest of the Dragon Houses. The ruling families before the Triumvirate. Before the System rose to power." She looked back at the symbol. "This was their seat of authority. A place where they judged disputes, made law, held court."

"And the System knows about it," Rhyosyn said. "It's watching this place specifically."

The notification pulsed again.

[Lineage Authority: Evaluating] [Subject: Aleric Tanim] [Bloodline Analysis: Ongoing] [Proximity to Historical Claim: Noted]

Al felt something shift in his chest. Not pain. Not power. Just... recognition. Like a lock clicking open.

The building's entrance stood before them, dark and silent.

Inside, the System would evaluate him. Would determine if his blood carried authority older than itself. Would decide if he was heir to something that predated the Triumvirate.

"We can turn back," Catrin said quietly. "We don't have to enter."

Al looked at the symbol above the door. At the ancient building. At the notification promising judgment and classification.

"No," he said. "We came this far. I need to know."

He stepped through the entrance into darkness.

And the System began its evaluation.

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Chapter Fifty-Three

CHAPTER 53

The interior of the Sovereign Hold was not dark after all.

Light filtered through narrow slits high in the walls, falling in precise geometric patterns across a floor made of polished stone that still held its luster after centuries. The main chamber was circular, perhaps fifty feet across, with a raised dais at the center and carved columns supporting a domed ceiling. Every surface bore inscriptions—not the worn, illegible carvings of the outdoor monuments, but crisp, clear text that seemed to have been protected from time itself.

Al stepped forward slowly, his footsteps echoing in the empty space. The women followed, spreading out instinctively to watch the approaches, but their attention kept returning to the chamber's center.

The dais held a single chair. Not a throne—too simple for that, too austere. Just a seat carved from dark stone, positioned to face the entrance. Around it, inscribed in concentric circles on the floor, were more symbols. Names, perhaps. Or titles. The script was the same as the symbol above the door.

The System notification pulsed insistently.

[Sovereign Hold: Active] [Judgment Protocols: Initializing] [Subject: Aleric Tanim] [Bloodline Analysis: In Progress] [Stand Upon the Dais]

The last line appeared not as passive information but as a command. Not hostile, not threatening, but absolute. A requirement, not a suggestion.

"Al," Catrin said quietly, her hand on her sword. "What's happening."

"The System wants me to stand on that platform," Al replied. He looked at the dais, at the inscriptions surrounding it, at the chair that had waited empty for generations. "It's going to evaluate me. Determine if I have authority here."

"Authority over what," Rhyosyn asked.

"I don't know," Al admitted. "But I think I'm about to find out."

He walked to the dais and stepped onto it.

The reaction was immediate.

The inscriptions on the floor began to glow—not with firelight or magical illumination, but with a pale, steady radiance that seemed to come from within the stone itself. The light spread outward in waves, racing along the carved text, climbing the walls, filling the chamber with cold brightness.

And the System... changed.

Al had grown accustomed to the System's presence in his mind—that constant, background awareness, the notifications and status updates and omnipresent observation. It was always there, neutral and mechanical, recording and evaluating without judgment.

Now it felt different. Older. Heavier. As if something deeper had woken up beneath the normal System interface, something that predated the current implementation.

The notification expanded, filling his vision with text.

[SOVEREIGN HOLD PROTOCOLS ACTIVATED] [BLOODLINE ANALYSIS COMPLETE] [LINEAGE CONFIRMED: TANIM LINE] [HISTORICAL CLASSIFICATION: DRAGON DESCENT - THIRD REMOVAL] [SOVEREIGNTY STATUS: DORMANT] [RIGHTS UNDER PRE-BINDING LAW: RECOGNIZED]

The words hung in Al's vision, clear and undeniable. Behind them, deeper in the System's architecture, he could sense something vast shifting—ancient code recognizing ancient authority, rules older than the Triumvirate engaging for the first time in centuries.

"Al," Elowen's voice came from very far away. "Your eyes."

He blinked, trying to focus on her. "What about them."

"They're glowing," she said, her voice tight with controlled fear. "Like the inscriptions."

Al raised his hand and saw it was true—his skin had taken on the same pale radiance as the carved text around him. Not burning. Not painful. Just... present. As if something in his blood was responding to the chamber, to the evaluation, to the recognition.

The System notification continued.

[EVALUATING ACTIVE CLAIMS] [Blood Feud: House Thorne vs. House Tanim] [Original Standing: Valid Under Post-Binding Law] [Revised Standing: INVALID Under Pre-Binding Authority] [Reason: Claimant Lacks Jurisdiction Over Sovereign Line] [Feud Status: VOIDED]

Al felt something snap—not physically, but in the space where the System lived in his mind. The constant pressure of the feud markers, the proximity logs, the threshold evaluations—all of it simply... stopped.

Not dismissed. Not paused. Erased. As if it had never existed.

[Feud State: TERMINATED] [Enforcement Ceased] [Balance: NO LONGER APPLICABLE] [Historical Precedence: Sovereignty Supersedes House Authority]

"It ended," Al said quietly. "The feud. It just ended."

Catrin stared at him. "How."

"Because House Thorne never had standing to challenge me in the first place," Al replied, reading the System's output. "Not under the old laws. Not if I'm..." He paused, processing the implications. "Not if I'm descended from Dragon Houses."

The glow began to fade from the inscriptions, from his skin, from the chamber itself. The light dimmed gradually, returning to normal illumination. But the change remained. The weight in the System's presence stayed—that sense of something older and more fundamental than the everyday interface.

A new notification appeared, simple and clinical.

[Classification Updated] [Status: Aleric Tanim - Sovereign Claimant (Dormant)] [Authority Level: Conditional] [Restrictions: Active Until Formal Recognition] [Note: Subject Is No Longer Classified As Standard Property]

Al stepped down from the dais, his legs unsteady. The women clustered around him, their expressions ranging from shock to calculation to something that might have been hope.

"What just happened," Rowena whispered.

"The System reclassified me," Al said. He checked his status, seeing the changes ripple through every interface. "I'm not property anymore. I'm... something else. Something the Triumvirate doesn't have authority over."

"That's not possible," Rhyosyn said. "The Triumvirate's authority is absolute. The System enforces their law across all territories."

"Most territories," Elowen corrected quietly. She looked around the chamber. "But not here. Not in places that predate the Triumvirate's claim. These Sovereign Holds must have had their own legal structure, their own System protocols, that never got fully overwritten."

"And when Al stepped onto that dais," Catrin finished, "the old protocols activated and recognized him as having authority the current system can't override."

They stood in silence for a moment, processing the implications. Outside, the sun continued its arc across the sky. The ruins remained empty. But everything had changed.

"The people following us," Rowena said suddenly. "The feud markers. What happens to them?"

Al checked the System again. The feud interface was completely gone. No status. No logs. No balance. Just empty space where the pressure had been.

"I don't know," he admitted. "The System voided the feud. It says House Thorne lacked jurisdiction. But those two people out there don't know that yet. They're still operating under the old rules."

"Until they get close enough for their System interfaces to update," Catrin said. "And then..."

"And then they'll see that the feud is over," Al finished. "Which means there's no more permission to kill me. No more requirement to protect me. The structure that bound them just disappeared."

Elowen frowned. "But there was a woman on a drake and someone on foot. If one was trying to kill you and one was trying to protect you, what do they do now that neither has System authorization?"

"Good question," Rhyosyn said darkly. "The killer might give up. Or might decide to kill you anyway, just without permission. And the protector might stand down. Or might try to claim you before word spreads that you're no longer standard property."

They all looked at Al.

He checked his weapons—the pistols still manifested smoothly, the rifle was available if needed. The leveling he'd done hadn't changed. His capabilities remained. But the protection the feud had provided—the System enforcement that kept both sides balanced—was gone.

"We need to leave," Catrin said decisively. "Now. Get distance from this place before anyone realizes what happened."

"Where," Al asked.

"The waystation," Catrin replied. "If word's going to spread, we want to be somewhere with witnesses when it does. Somewhere the Crown has authority and can't ignore what just happened."

They moved quickly, gathering their gear and heading for the exit. As they passed through the door, Al glanced back at the chamber. The inscriptions had gone dark again. The dais stood empty. The chair waited.

But something had changed. Something fundamental in the world's structure.

He'd crossed a threshold he couldn't uncross.

They emerged into afternoon sunlight and began descending from the valley, moving fast but not running. Behind them, the Sovereign Hold settled back into silence, its protocols activated for the first time in centuries, its judgment delivered.

Al felt the System's presence in his mind, subtly different now. Still there. Still observing. But... hesitant. As if it were uncertain what to do with him.

The notification pulsed one final time.

[Status Update Broadcast: Regional] [Classification Change: Distributed to Local Nodes] [Estimated Propagation Time: 4-6 Hours] [Warning: Political Response Expected]

Four to six hours before everyone within range knew that a dormant Sovereign Claimant had been recognized. Before the Triumvirate received notification that someone existed who had legal authority predating their own. Before every House, faction, and power structure had to recalculate their positions.

"How long to the waystation," Al asked.

"Three hours if we push," Catrin replied.

"Then we push," Al said.

They moved down the mountain, following the ancient road back to standard territory. With each step, the System's normal presence returned—stronger, clearer, resuming its typical function.

But it was changed for Al. Every interface, every notification, carried a subtle marker now. A flag that said he wasn't like others. That rules applied differently to him.

An hour into their descent, they rounded a bend and stopped.

Two figures stood on the road ahead. The woman from the drake—no mount visible now, just her on foot with the cavalry saber at her hip. And another woman, older, wearing the kind of practical leathers that marked her as a road agent or independent contractor.

The hunter and the protector.

Both stood motionless, staring at something only they could see. Their System interfaces, Al realized. The notifications telling them the feud was voided. That their permissions and requirements had vanished.

The hunter looked up first. Her eyes met Al's across fifty yards of ancient stone. Her hand moved toward her saber, then stopped. She checked her interface again, confusion and frustration warring across her features.

The protector spoke, her voice carrying clearly in the mountain air. "The feud is ended. House Thorne's claim is voided." She looked at Al with undisguised curiosity. "What are you?"

"Someone who just got reclassified," Al replied carefully.

The hunter's jaw clenched. "The System says I no longer have permission to engage you. That my contract is void due to jurisdictional error." She looked at the protector. "Yours too?"

"Mine says you're no longer property requiring protection," the protector confirmed. "That you have sovereign status pending formal recognition."

They all stood in silence for a moment. Two women who'd spent weeks hunting and protecting their target according to strict System rules, now finding themselves without purpose or permission.

Finally, the hunter spoke again. "I was paid. Contract's void but the coin's already spent. I should finish it anyway."

"You could try," Al said quietly. "But now there's no System enforcement. No balance. No rules requiring anyone to hold back." He rested his hand near where his pistol would manifest. "Just people making choices."

The hunter studied him, then the four women arrayed around him, weapons ready. She calculated odds. Weighed costs.

Then she turned and walked away, heading south without another word.

The protector watched her go, then looked back at Al. "My House will want to speak with you. About what you are. What you represent." She paused. "I'm not going to try to force you. But you should know—what happened in that Sovereign Hold will reach the Triumvirate within days. They'll send people. Lots of people."

"I know," Al said.

She nodded once, then followed the hunter south, leaving the road empty before them.

They continued east in silence. Behind them, the mountains held their secrets. Ahead, the waystation waited with whatever complications would come next.

But the feud was over. The constant pressure, the proximity logs, the threat that followed them everywhere—gone.

Al should have felt relieved.

Instead, he felt exposed.

Because now, instead of two people bound by strict rules, there would be hundreds operating under no rules at all.

The System had recognized him. Had classified him as something special, something outside normal authority.

And that made him more valuable—and more dangerous—than he'd ever been before.

"Al," Catrin said quietly as they walked.

"Yeah."

"When we get to the waystation. When word spreads. When the Houses and the Crown start moving." She looked at him. "What do you want to do?"

Al thought about the chair in the Sovereign Hold. About sovereignty and authority and power he'd never asked for. About rules that predated the current order and wouldn't bend to it.

"I want to understand what I am," he said finally. "And then I want to decide what that means on my own terms."

"And if the Triumvirate won't let you," Rhyosyn asked.

Al's hand moved to where the rifle would manifest. "Then they'll learn that sovereignty means I don't need their permission."

They walked on toward civilization, toward complications, toward a future that had just become infinitely more complex.

Behind them, the Sovereign Hold settled back into waiting.

Its judgment delivered.

Its heir recognized.

The old power stirring after centuries of sleep.

And the System, for perhaps the first time since its rise, uncertain what would happen next.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

CHAPTER 54

The Hall of Three Crowns

The courier burst through the side doors at dawn, her armor dusty from hard riding, her kestrel still clinging to her shoulder with ruffled feathers and wild eyes. She dropped to one knee before the dais, holding up a sealed scroll bound with the crest of House Vaughn.

The Hall of Three Crowns was not yet full. Only the morning clerks and record-keepers occupied the lower galleries, their quills scratching away at endless documentation. The three thrones sat empty on their obsidian dais—the coiled serpent of gold, the pillar of interlocking scrolls, the veiled silver filigree.

The Matrons had not yet arrived for the day's business.

Then the System spoke.

Not to the courier. Not to the clerks. To everyone within the Hall simultaneously.

A pale blue shimmer materialized in the air above the empty thrones. Text formed, crisp and clinical, visible to every person present.

SYSTEM ALERT - REGIONAL BROADCAST Classification Change Detected Subject: Aleric Tanim Previous Status: Foreign Integration (Property Classification) Updated Status: [RESTRICTED ACCESS] Authority Level: Elevated Effective Immediately

The notification hung in the air for exactly ten seconds, then dissolved.

The scratching of quills had stopped. Every clerk stared at the space where the notification had been. The courier remained kneeling, her mouth slightly open.

Then the second notification appeared.

SYSTEM NOTICE Blood Feud Status Update Feud ID: [Thorne-Tanim-2847] Claimant: House Thorne Respondent: House Tanim Status: TERMINATED Reason: Jurisdictional Review - Claimant Lacks Standing Further Action: Not Permitted Enforcement: Ceased

Silence.

Then chaos.

Clerks abandoned their desks, rushing toward the administrative chambers. The courier stood, forgotten, as officials began shouting for the Matrons, for legal scholars, for anyone who could explain what they'd just witnessed.

The System didn't broadcast classification changes. It didn't terminate Blood Feuds through "jurisdictional review." Those weren't things that happened.

Except they just had.

Lady Sovereign Merra, Voice of Blood, received the notification in her private chambers while being dressed for the day's sessions. The shimmer appeared directly in her field of vision—the System's way of ensuring the message couldn't be ignored.

She read it three times.

Her handmaiden stood frozen, a ceremonial pin still held uselessly in her fingers.

"Get out," Merra said quietly.

The handmaiden fled.

Merra sat down heavily on the dressing bench and read the notifications again. Her hands were shaking—a sensation she hadn't experienced in fifteen years of holding one-third of the realm's authority.

Jurisdictional review.

She'd studied feud law her entire life. Taught it. Judged cases under it. There was no such thing as jurisdictional review for Blood Feuds. The System verified standing when the feud formed. If House Thorne lacked jurisdiction, the feud would never have been recognized in the first place.

Unless.

Unless something had changed about Aleric Tanim between the feud's formation and now. Something fundamental enough to retroactively void Thorne's claim. The System hadn’t corrected an error. It had incorporated new information. Authority that existed before the Binding meant nothing until something old enough to recognize it had forced the issue.

She pulled up her personal System interface with trembling fingers and tried to query the restricted classification.

ACCESS DENIED Clearance Level: Insufficient Refer to: Historical Archives - Pre-Binding Authority Protocols

Merra stared at the denial notice.

She was Voice of Blood. One of three rulers of the realm. She had clearance to access military secrets, House bloodline records, classified System functions that most citizens didn't know existed.

And she didn't have clearance to view Aleric Tanim's classification.

Pre-Binding Authority Protocols.

She stood abruptly and walked to her private library, pulling volumes from shelves with increasingly frantic motions. Pre-Binding. Before the System's current implementation. Before the Triumvirate's rise.

Before the Dragon Houses fell.

Her hands stopped on a leather-bound tome, its spine cracked with age. She opened it to the table of contents, scanning desperately.

There. Chapter Seven: Sovereignty and Lineage Priority Under Ancient Law.

She began to read, and with each paragraph, her fear grew.

***

The Black Reef

Marada Thorne stood at the stern of her flagship, watching the sunrise paint the water in shades of amber and blood. Her first mate, Ysolde Grin, stood three paces away, waiting.

The morning had been routine. Watch reports. Weather patterns. The usual rhythm of a ship at anchor.

Then the System notification appeared.

Marada read it once. Blinked. Read it again.

SYSTEM NOTICE Blood Feud Status Update Feud ID: [Thorne-Tanim-2847] Status: TERMINATED Reason: Jurisdictional Review - Claimant Lacks Standing Further Action: Not Permitted

Her rings stopped tapping against the rail.

That was how Ysolde knew something was very wrong. The Captain's hands only went still when she was calculating something that frightened her.

"Captain?" Ysolde asked carefully.

Marada didn't respond immediately. She read the notification a third time, then a fourth, as if the words might change if she stared at them long enough.

"The feud is voided," she said finally. Her voice was flat. Controlled. "House Thorne lacks jurisdiction."

Ysolde's eyes widened. "That's... that's not possible. The System verified our standing when the feud formed."

"Apparently it changed its mind." Marada's jaw tightened. "Or something changed that made our standing irrelevant."

She pulled up her System interface and tried to access more information about the termination. The response came immediately.

QUERY DENIED Jurisdictional Determination: Final Subject Classification: Restricted No Further Information Available

Marada closed the interface with a sharp gesture.

"Captain," Ysolde said quietly. "What does this mean?"

Marada turned to look at her first mate. Ysolde had sailed with her for twelve years. Had seen her navigate storms, political betrayals, naval battles, and Crown investigations. Had never seen her look uncertain.

Until now.

"It means," Marada said slowly, "that I may have made a mistake."

Ysolde waited.

"We targeted a foreign male," Marada continued. "Valuable. Rare. Dangerous, clearly, given he killed three of my riders. But ultimately just property with unusual magic." She paused. "That's what we thought we were taking."

"And now?"

"Now the System says we lacked jurisdiction to challenge him." Marada's voice was still controlled, but something cold lived beneath it. "Blood Feuds don't void through jurisdictional review, Ysolde. Not ever. The System doesn't make that kind of determination."

"Unless?"

"Unless the target has authority that predates the current legal structure." Marada turned back to the water. "Authority the System acknowledges but won't explain. Authority old enough that House Thorne—a recognized noble House with legitimate standing—is considered too low in the hierarchy to challenge it."

Ysolde was quiet for a long moment. "The Dragon Houses."

"That's what I'm thinking."

"But the Dragon Houses are gone. Destroyed. Absorbed. Fled."

"Clearly not all of them." Marada's hands resumed their tapping, but the rhythm was faster now. Agitated. "We thought we were starting a political fire. Creating chaos between the Triumvirate and Saxerwiemer. A calculated risk that would profit us regardless of outcome."

"And instead?"

"Instead we may have attacked something ancient that was sleeping." Marada's voice dropped. "And now it's awake."

A crew member approached cautiously. "Captain, morning reports—"

"Not now," Marada snapped.

The sailor fled.

Ysolde stepped closer. "What do we do?"

Marada was silent for a long moment, watching the sun climb higher. The water was calm. The wind was steady. Everything looked normal.

But nothing was normal.

"We wait," she said finally. "We gather information. We find out what Aleric Tanim actually is, what authority he actually holds, and what the System's reclassification actually means."

"And if he comes for us?" Ysolde asked. "The feud is voided. System enforcement is gone. He's free to act."

"So are we," Marada replied. But her voice held no confidence. "But if the System itself says we lack standing to challenge him, then attacking him again would be..." She trailed off.

"Suicide," Ysolde finished.

"Perhaps." Marada turned away from the rail. "Send word to our spies in the capital. I want to know everything about this classification change. Everything. Everything about Dragon House lineages that survived the fall."

"That information is restricted, Captain. Possibly destroyed."

"Then find people who remember." Marada's eyes were hard. "I've survived by being smarter and faster than my enemies. Right now, I'm operating blind. That ends. Today."

She walked toward her cabin, then paused at the door.

"And Ysolde?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Prepare the fleet to move. If this situation destabilizes further, I want us positioned to run or fight, whichever proves necessary."

"Where would we run to?" Ysolde asked quietly. "If we've angered something the System itself defers to?"

Marada didn't have an answer.

She entered her cabin and closed the door.

Alone, finally, she allowed herself a moment of pure, unfiltered fear.

What the hell did I do?

***

House Vaughn - The Mage Tower

Archmage Seret Vaughn was deep in meditation when the System notification interrupted her. The intrusion was so unusual—so unprecedented—that she lost her concentration entirely, the spell construct she'd been building collapsing into harmless mist.

She read the notification with growing alarm.

Then she did something she hadn't done in twenty years.

She ran.

Down the tower stairs, through corridors where younger mages pressed themselves against walls to let her pass, into the archive vault where the oldest records were kept.

"Clear the room!" she commanded.

The archivists scattered.

Seret pulled volumes from shelves with shaking hands. Pre-Binding law. Sovereignty protocols. Dragon House authority structures. Texts so old they predated the Triumvirate's founding.

She found what she was looking for in a manuscript that should have been destroyed centuries ago.

On the Rights and Privileges of Sovereign Bloodlines

Chapter Three: Recognition and Reclassification

Should a Sovereign Bloodline manifest after prolonged dormancy, the System shall evaluate and confirm lineage through designated Judgment Sites. Upon confirmation, all lesser claims against the Sovereign are voided, regardless of prior standing or recorded obligation.

No House, Guild, or religious authority may challenge or claim a confirmed Sovereign without explicit invitation or contractual acceptance. Violation of this principle constitutes defiance of Pre-Binding Law and will be corrected through System override.

Seret read it three times.

Then she began to laugh.

Not from humor. From the sheer absurdity of it. From relief and terror in equal measure.

Her daughter, Rhyosyn, was traveling with this man. Had been promised to him in marriage. Was listed as primary supporter on his feud record.

The feud that just voided because he was reclassified as a Sovereign.

Which meant Rhyosyn wasn't engaged to foreign property.

She was engaged to someone the System considered outside the Triumvirate's authority to claim.

"Oh, daughter," Seret whispered to the empty archive. "What have you found?"

***

House Arwen - Military Command

Lady Maera Arwen was in the training yard, overseeing morning drills, when the notification arrived. She dismissed it immediately—she'd review whatever administrative update later—and returned her attention to the recruits.

Then she saw her officers all frozen, staring at nothing, their faces pale.

"What is it?" she demanded.

Her second-in-command turned slowly. "Ma'am. The Tanim feud. It's... terminated."

"Terminated how?"

"Jurisdictional review. House Thorne lacked standing."

Maera went very still. "Show me."

She accessed her System interface and read the notification herself.

Then the second one. The classification change.

Restricted access. Authority level: Elevated.

Maera had commanded armies. Had led campaigns in the borderlands. Had stood before the Triumvirate and argued military policy. She knew law, strategy, and power structures.

And she knew, with absolute certainty, that this changed everything.

"Where is my daughter?" she asked quietly.

"Traveling with Tanim, ma'am."

Maera nodded slowly. "Send riders. Find them. Do not attempt to separate Catrin from the group. Do not treat Aleric Tanim as property. Do not give orders. If the System can’t stop him, then people will try.”

"Ma'am?"

"Just find them," Maera said. "And when you do, ask—politely—if they require assistance."

The officer blinked. "Ask?"

"Yes," Maera said softly. "Because if the System has reclassified him, and if House Thorne lacked jurisdiction to challenge him, then we very likely lack authority to command him." She looked at her officers. "And I will not make Thorne's mistake."

***

House Pryce - The Counting House

Lady Isolde Pryce was reviewing ledgers when the notification appeared. She read it once, set down her quill with deliberate care, and summoned her sister-wife.

Lyra arrived quickly, sensing urgency.

"Read this," Isolde said, gesturing at the notification still visible in her System interface.

Lyra read. Her expression shifted from confusion to alarm to something approaching panic.

"This isn't possible," she whispered.

"Apparently it is." Isolde leaned back in her chair. "Question: what happens to our marriage claim if the man in question is reclassified outside our authority?"

Lyra's face went pale. "The contracts..."

"Exactly." Isolde pulled up several documents, scanning quickly. "We negotiated those agreements under the assumption that Aleric Tanim was property to be claimed and controlled. If he's now classified as something with elevated authority..." She trailed off.

"The contracts may be void."

"Or worse," Isolde said. "They may be enforceable, but only if he chooses to accept them." She looked at Lyra. "Where is Elowen?"

"With him. With the group."

"Good." Isolde stood. "Send word. Immediately. Tell our daughter to be very, very careful. Tell her to cultivate goodwill, not obedience. Tell her that everything we assumed about this situation may be wrong."

"And if she asks why?"

Isolde gestured at the notification. "Tell her the System just reclassified her fiancé as someone even the Triumvirate can't command. And that House Pryce survives by being smarter than our competitors."

She walked to the window, looking out over the city.

"We bet on foreign property," she said quietly. "We may have accidentally bet on a king."

***

The Triumvirate Convenes

Within two hours of the broadcast, all three Matrons had assembled in the Hall of Three Crowns. The session was closed. Only their most trusted advisors remained.

"We need to understand what happened," said the Voice of Law, Lady Corrine. Her hands were folded on the table before her, but her knuckles were white. "The System doesn't behave this way."

"It just did," replied Merra, Voice of Blood. She'd brought three different law volumes with her. "I've been researching. Pre-Binding Authority Protocols are mentioned in exactly four historical texts, all of which were supposed to be destroyed during the Consolidation."

"But were not," added the Voice of Faith, Lady Serana. She was the oldest of the three, her silver hair bound in intricate braids. "The temples kept copies. For historical reference, we claimed. In truth, because we feared forgetting something important."

"And did we?" Corrine asked. "Did we forget something important?"

Serana opened a text so old the pages cracked as she turned them. "The Dragon Houses held authority that predated the System's current implementation. When they fell—when they were destroyed or scattered—that authority was supposed to transfer to us. To the Triumvirate. To the Crown we rebuilt from their ashes."

"Supposed to," Merra repeated. "But didn't?"

"The authority wasn't destroyed," Serana said quietly. "It was encoded into bloodlines. Into family lines that went into hiding or fled beyond our

reach. And the System—the deepest levels of it, the parts that predate our Triumvirate—still recognizes those lines when they surface."

Silence settled over the table.

"So we have a foreign male," Corrine said slowly, "with American Magic we don't understand, who somehow carries Dragon House lineage, and who the System just reclassified as having authority we can't override."

"That's the situation," Merra confirmed.

"Where is he now?"

"West of the Millford waystation," Merra replied. "Traveling with his fiancées."

"His fiancées," Corrine repeated. "Three noble daughters from three different Houses."

"Who are all now engaged to someone outside our authority," Serana finished. "Which means their loyalty may become... complicated."

Merra leaned forward. "What do we do?"

The three Matrons looked at each other.

"We do what we should have done from the beginning," Serana said finally. "We talk to him. Not as property. Not as a threat. As someone who might have legitimate claim to authority we thought extinct."

"And if he claims the Crown?" Corrine asked.

"Then we negotiate," Merra replied. "Because the alternative is trying to fight someone the System itself defers to. And that," she looked at the empty throne in the center of the Hall, "would be suicide."

The three Matrons sat in silence, staring at the throne that had been empty for generations.

Wondering if, perhaps, it was about to be filled.

***

Al walked through the forest three days west of the waystation, completely unaware that the entire political structure of the realm was currently in crisis because of him.

He was focused on more immediate concerns: making sure they had water, watching for pursuit, and trying to figure out what the hell "Sovereign Claimant (Dormant)" actually meant.

The System had gone mostly quiet since the Sovereign Hold. Just the normal interface. Status updates. No more dramatic reclassifications.

He should have known that quiet wouldn't last.

Behind him, in cities and ships and halls of power across the realm, people read System notifications and tried to understand what had just changed.

And ahead of him, the waystation waited.

Where questions would become unavoidable.

Where the world would finally have to decide what to do about a man the System considered outside everyone's authority.

Whether they—or he—was ready for it.

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Chapter Fifty-Five

CHAPTER 55

They made camp two miles east of the Sovereign Hold, in a depression shielded by fallen logs and dense scrub. No fire. Cold rations. Watch rotations every two hours. The routine was automatic now—they'd been operating this way long enough that no one needed to discuss it.

Al sat with his back against a log, checking his weapons. The pistols manifested smoothly when he called them, dismissed just as easily. The rifle required more concentration but came when needed. He was getting better at the summoning, more efficient. The drain was still there but manageable.

The System notification had been quiet since they'd left the Hold. Just the normal interface. Status updates. Capacity measurements.

Then it chimed.

[Combat Summary: Finalizing] [Engagements Recorded: 3] [Hostile Entities Defeated: 18] [Breakdown:] - Kobolds: 8 - Goblins: 5 - Ogres: 3 - Human Combatants (Feud-Related): 2] [Experience Gained: 2,840] [Total Experience: 7,840 / 10,000]

Al blinked. He hadn't realized the System had been tracking everything since the feud started. He'd been too busy surviving to pay attention to the accumulated count.

Another notification appeared.

[Blood Feud: Terminated] [Resolution Type: Jurisdictional Override] [Compensation Awarded for Structural Instability] [Summoning Capacity Increased: +10 cu in] [New Capacity: 150 cu in]

He felt the change immediately—not power, exactly, but space. Room to work. The volume constraint that had been slowly expanding with each level suddenly jumped. He focused inward, checking the parameters.

One hundred fifty cubic inches. Not quite enough for the rifle. Enough for multiple pistols simultaneously. Enough for tools, equipment, maybe even—

He stopped that line of thinking. One step at a time.

Catrin moved to sit beside him, her movements quiet and controlled. She didn't speak immediately, just sat watching the darkness beyond their perimeter.

"The System gave you something," she said finally. Not a question.

"Capacity increase," Al confirmed. "Ten cubic inches. Compensation for the feud ending the way it did."

Catrin nodded slowly. "The System doesn't normally compensate for feuds. They just... end. Or they don't."

"This one was different," Al said.

"Because of what you are." Catrin's voice was neutral, but there was weight beneath it. "What the Sovereign Hold confirmed you are."

Al didn't respond immediately. He dismissed the pistol he'd been holding and watched it fade. "I don't know what I am. The System says Sovereign Claimant. Dormant. I don't know what that means in practice."

"It means the rules changed," Catrin replied. "For you. For us. For everyone who thought they understood how authority works in this world." She paused. "My mother will have seen the System notifications by now. The Triumvirate too. They'll all have received the broadcast."

"And?" Al asked.

"And they'll be trying to understand what it means," Catrin said. "My mother doesn't panic. She plans. Right now she's probably pulling every historical text on Pre-Binding authority she can find. Consulting with legal scholars. Trying to determine what your classification actually means for House Arwen's claim." She met his eyes. "And she's afraid. They're all afraid. The Triumvirate, the Houses, everyone who thought they controlled the system. You broke something fundamental."

"I didn't break anything," Al said. "I just walked into an old building."

"You walked into a Judgment Site," Catrin corrected. "And the System evaluated you and decided you had authority predating everything they've built. That's not nothing, Al. That's..." She trailed off.

"Terrifying," Al finished quietly.

"Yes."

They sat in silence for a moment. Around them, the others settled into their rest cycles. Rhyosyn had first watch. Elowen was already asleep, her breathing deep and steady. Rowena lay with her eyes open, staring at nothing.

"The bodies," Al said, changing the subject. "How many did we count?"

Catrin pulled a small journal from her pack—the same one Elowen had been using to record their travels. She'd taken over the combat logging. "Eighteen confirmed kills between all our engagements. Eight kobolds across two encounters. Five goblins in the stone circle fight. Three ogres at the ruin. And two humans during the pursuit before we reached goblin lands."

Al's jaw tightened at that last number. The two figures who'd been following them under feud markers. One had tried to kill him. One had tried to protect him. Both had been held back by System constraints until those constraints disappeared.

"The hunter," he said. "The one on the drake. She walked away."

"She did," Catrin confirmed. "The protector did too. Both of them just... left. Once the System voided the feud, they had no more permission to act. No more requirement to act. So they left."

"Smart," Al said.

"Or frightened," Catrin replied. "Same thing, sometimes."

Al thought about that. About two professional agents, bound by System law to hunt or protect him, suddenly finding themselves without purpose or permission. Without the structure that had defined their actions for weeks.

"What happens to them now?" he asked.

Catrin shrugged. "They go back to whoever hired them and explain that the contract is void. They probably get paid anyway—most feud contracts include clauses for System termination. Then they move on to the next job."

"Just like that."

"Just like that," Catrin confirmed. "Feuds are business here, Al. Professional. Structured. When the structure dissolves, so does the obligation." She paused. "That's how it's supposed to work, anyway. This situation is... unprecedented."

Al checked the notification again. The experience total sat at 7,840 out of 10,000 needed for the next level. He was close. Two more significant engagements, maybe three smaller ones, and he'd hit Level 3.

"What does leveling feel like to you?" he asked Catrin.

She considered the question. "Like crossing a threshold. You're stronger, faster, more capable. Skills that were difficult become easier. New abilities unlock. The System recognizes you've grown and adjusts accordingly."

"Does it hurt?"

"No," Catrin said. "It's... clarifying. Like fog lifting. You see yourself more clearly. Understand your capabilities better." She looked at him. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm close to Level 3," Al replied. "And I don't know if the System will treat my progression the same way it treats everyone else's."

Catrin's expression grew troubled. "You think your classification will affect how you level?"

"I think everything about me is outside normal parameters," Al said. "Foreign Integration. American Magic. Sovereign Claimant. None of that fits standard System architecture. So when I level..." He shrugged. "I don't know what happens."

"Only one way to find out," Catrin said.

"Yeah," Al agreed. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Rhyosyn appeared at the edge of their small camp, moving silently through the darkness. "Movement," she said quietly. "South. Maybe half a mile out."

Al and Catrin were on their feet immediately. The others woke without sound, hands moving to weapons.

"What kind of movement," Catrin asked.

"Can't tell," Rhyosyn replied. "Too far. But it's deliberate. Not animals."

Al summoned the monocular and moved to the camp's edge. He scanned south, the night vision turning darkness into shades of green. There—movement. Multiple figures. Moving in formation.

"Five contacts," he said quietly. "Armored. Carrying polearms and shields. Military formation."

"Crown patrol," Catrin said. She didn't sound relieved.

"Or House troops," Elowen added, now fully alert. "Could be anyone looking for us."

Al watched the patrol move. They were heading east, not directly toward the camp, but their path would bring them close. "They'll pass within two hundred yards of our position in about ten minutes."

"Do we engage?" Rhyosyn asked.

"No," Catrin said immediately. "We let them pass. We're not here to fight Crown troops or House guards. We're trying to reach the waystation without complications."

"They might not give us that choice," Rhyosyn replied. "If they spot us __"

"Then we talk first," Catrin said firmly. "No violence unless they force it."

Al lowered the monocular. "What if they're here because of the classification change? What if they're specifically looking for me?"

Catrin's expression was grim. "Then we find out what they want. But we don't assume hostility. Not yet."

They waited in silence, weapons ready, watching the patrol approach through the darkness. The figures moved with professional discipline, maintaining formation, checking their surroundings. Not hunting. Patrolling.

The patrol passed two hundred yards south of their position without deviating. Continued east. Disappeared into the night.

Al released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"They didn't see us," Rowena whispered.

"Or they saw us and chose not to engage," Rhyosyn said. "That might be worse."

Catrin nodded slowly. "If they reported our position, more patrols will come. We need to move at first light."

"Agreed," Al said. He dismissed the monocular and returned to his position. "Get some rest while you can. Tomorrow's going to be complicated."

They settled back into watch rotation. Al lay under his poncho, staring at the stars through gaps in the canopy. The System notification still glowed faintly at the edge of his vision.

[Status: Sovereign Claimant (Dormant)] [Experience: 7,840 / 10,000] [Summoning Capacity: 150 cu in] [Feud State: Terminated]

Terminated. The word should have brought relief. Instead, it just felt like the end of one problem and the beginning of something larger.

The feud had been simple. Dangerous, but simple. Two sides. Clear rules. System enforcement keeping things balanced.

Now there were no rules. No balance. Just a classification he didn't understand, authority he hadn't asked for, and an entire political structure trying to figure out what to do about him.

Al closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

Tomorrow, they'd reach the waystation. Tomorrow, questions would become unavoidable.

Tomorrow, he'd have to start figuring out what it meant to be something the System called Sovereign.

But tonight, for a few more hours, he could just be a man trying to survive in a world that didn't make sense.

That was enough.

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Chapter Fifty-Six

CHAPTER 56

The rope coiled on Special Agent Marius Webb's desk like a question mark—three feet of hand-twisted fiber that had no business existing. Outside his office window, the Norfolk field office hummed with ordinary investigations: fraud, theft, the daily attrition of military discipline. On his desk sat the impossible.

Webb didn't touch it. The evidence bag was sealed, tagged, catalogued. He'd already read the preliminary report three times, searching for the error that would make this ordinary. He hadn't found it.

"Material: unknown plant fiber. Construction: hand-twisted, three-strand, consistent with pre-industrial techniques. Radiological markers: zero."

Zero. Every organic thing on Earth carried cesium-137, a signature of the nuclear age. This rope carried nothing. It had grown somewhere that had never heard of Hiroshima, of test sites, of the twentieth century.

Webb's phone buzzed. Conference room. Now.

He gathered his files—not many, because the case was still mostly absence—and walked past cubicles where agents processed credit card fraud and assault charges. The ordinary world. He envied it.

Dr. Elaine Mercer waited in the conference room with two men who stood like they were guarding something. She wore civilian clothes but held herself like she'd spent decades in uniform. She didn't offer her hand.

"Special Agent Webb," she said. "I'm taking over your armory investigation."

Webb set his folder on the table. "With respect, Dr. Mercer, NCIS doesn't hand off cases because—"

"Seventeen installations," Mercer interrupted. "Five weeks. Fort Bragg, Norfolk, Pendleton, Benning, Lejeune. Army, Navy, Marine Corps. Same pattern at every site."

She opened her tablet, swiped to a map of the United States dotted with red markers. "Secure storage. Impossible access. Objects vanishing,

returning used. The rope you recovered is the first physical evidence that survived the transfer."

Webb felt the room shift. "Seventeen?"

"Marine Corps armory at Camp Lejeune was the first you encountered," Mercer said. "Gunnery Sergeant Howard's incident. But it didn't start there, and it hasn't stopped."

She pulled up photographs—different armories, different bases, identical empty spaces where weapons had sat seconds before. "Fort Bragg, three weeks ago. Medical supplies and field equipment. Some returned with soil that doesn't match Earth chemistry. Naval Station Norfolk, communications gear that came back showing signs of deployment in a temperate forest environment. Camp Pendleton, body armor with impact marks from projectiles that don't match any known caliber."

"Who's doing this?" Webb asked.

"We don't know," one of Mercer's men said. Eastern European accent. "But they're following a pattern. Taking weapons, equipment, survival gear. Using it. Returning it when they're done."

Mercer swiped to a new screen. "The rope analysis is definitive. Unknown plant species. Unknown soil mineral composition. Complete absence of post-1945 radiological markers. This material was grown on a world that never had atmospheric nuclear testing."

Webb sat down. Hard. "You're saying this is extraterrestrial."

"I'm saying it's not from here," Mercer replied. "Not from here, and not from now. The construction is human—hand-twisted, three-strand lay. Someone made this. Someone who learned rope-making from human tradition, but grew their fiber somewhere else."

Sarah Chen entered, carrying coffee that had gone cold hours ago. She stopped when she saw the map. "Jesus. That's not just Lejeune."

"Your partner was just catching up," Mercer said. "The investigation has escalated beyond local jurisdiction. My task force handles unexplained phenomena with national security implications."

"Unexplained phenomena," Chen repeated carefully.

"We avoid 'paranormal,'" Mercer said dryly. "But yes. Something is accessing our most secure facilities, taking military equipment, using it in conditions we can't identify, and returning it. The rope tells us where—somewhere with Earth-like biology but different evolution. Somewhere

close enough that human techniques work, but different enough that the plants aren't our plants."

Webb looked at the red dots on the map. Seventeen installations. A pattern spreading like blood in water. "What do you need from us?"

"Everything," Mercer said. "Your files, your footage, your access. And your discretion." She paused. "This is no longer a theft investigation. This is a contact scenario. We need to know who's on the other side, and what they want."

She pulled out one final folder. Pushed it across the table.

Webb opened it. A personnel photograph stared up at him—a young Marine in dress blues, sharp-featured, competent eyes. The name tag read TANIM.

"Corporal Aleric Tanim," Mercer said. "Silver Star recipient. Disappeared six weeks ago during the awards ceremony at the White House. You remember the coverage."

Webb remembered. Everyone remembered. The news had played the footage for weeks—Tanim standing at attention, the President reaching for the medal, then the Marine simply... falling. Through the floor. Through solid ground. The cameras caught him mid-vanish, one moment there, the next moment gone, leaving only a scatter of dirt where he had stood.

"National news," Chen said quietly. "They thought it was a weapon. Some kind of terrorist tech."

"That was the fear," Mercer agreed. "But we never found a device. Never found a group claiming responsibility. Never found a body." She pulled out another photograph. The rope. Close-up of the fibers. "Forensics found hair embedded in this rope. Human hair. DNA analysis came back this morning."

Webb already knew. He could see it in her face.

"It's his," Mercer said. "Aleric Tanim. The Marine who fell through the floor on live television. His DNA is in the rope that appeared in your armory. He's not dead. He's somewhere else. And he's been busy."

She tapped the map. "Seventeen armories. Seventeen supply caches. Someone over there needed weapons, needed gear. Someone who knew our systems, our protocols, our equipment. Someone who survived."

Webb looked at the photograph of Tanim, then at the rope, then at the map spreading across the table like a web. Outside, the ordinary world

continued its ordinary crimes. In here, the investigation had just become something else entirely.

Someone knocked at the conference room door. Webb didn't answer. He was staring at Tanim's file, remembering the news footage—the Marine falling, the ground swallowing him, the cameras rolling while the impossible happened in real time.

Now the impossible was sending back souvenirs.

"Tell them I'm coming home," the rope seemed to whisper. The investigators just had the fiber, the DNA, and the growing certainty that someone was fighting a war they couldn't see, borrowing their weapons to do it, and leaving proof that he intended to return.

***

Three Days West of the Waystation

Al broke down the M1911 for the fourth time, laying the pieces out on a flat stone in order of disassembly. Rowena watched with intense focus, her hands folded in her lap.

"Slide. Barrel. Recoil spring. Frame," Al said, pointing to each piece. "You need to know every part. Not just how to shoot, but how the weapon works. Because if it fails, you need to clear it fast."

Rowena nodded. They'd been at this for an hour. She hadn't complained once, hadn't gotten frustrated, just absorbed information with the same determination she'd shown since joining the sisterhood.

"Why does it come apart?" she asked.

"Maintenance," Al replied. "Weapons are tools. Tools need care. If you don't clean it, it jams. If it jams in combat, you die." He reassembled the pistol with practiced efficiency. "Also, understanding how it works helps you trust it. You're not just pointing and hoping. You know why the trigger does what it does. Why the bullet goes where you aim."

He held out the reassembled pistol. "Your turn."

Rowena took it carefully, checking the chamber automatically—Al had drilled that into her first. Always verify empty. Always assume loaded. Never point at anything you don't intend to destroy.

She broke it down slowly, narrating each step. Her hands were steadier than they'd been an hour ago.

"Good," Al said when she finished. "Again. Faster this time."

Rowena reassembled and broke down the weapon three more times, each iteration smoother than the last. By the end, she was working with confidence, her movements precise.

"I understand it now," she said quietly. "The mechanism. The purpose."

"That's the point," Al replied. He summoned a second pistol and laid it beside the first. "The weapon doesn't care who holds it. Noble or commoner. Man or woman. If you understand it and respect it, it works. That's the kind of equality people don't usually talk about."

Rowena looked at him, something shifting in her expression. "You're teaching us to be dangerous."

"I'm teaching you to survive," Al corrected. "There's a difference. Dangerous is a choice. Survival is a requirement."

Footsteps approached from behind—Catrin, returning from her patrol of the perimeter. She stopped at the edge of their makeshift range and watched Rowena reassemble the pistol.

"How's she doing?" Catrin asked.

"Fast learner," Al replied. "Careful. Methodical. She'll be solid once she gets comfortable with live fire."

Catrin nodded, then looked at Al. "The others want training too."

Al had been expecting this. "All of them?"

"Yes," Catrin said. "We've been watching you work with Rowena. What you're teaching isn't just about weapons. It's about confidence. Control." She paused. "We want that too."

Al studied her face. Catrin was military trained, disciplined, already deadly with crossbow and blade. But she was asking, not demanding. Treating this as something she wanted to learn, not something she was entitled to.

"All right," he said. "We'll do it in pairs. Two-hour sessions. I'll teach you the fundamentals, then you practice on your own time. I'm not running a boot camp, but I'll make sure you're competent."

"Fair," Catrin agreed. She looked at Rowena. "You're doing well."

Rowena's face flushed slightly with pride. "Thank you."

Catrin walked back toward camp, leaving Al and Rowena alone again. Rowena set down the pistol and looked at Al directly.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"Teaching you?"

"Yes," she said. "You could keep the weapons to yourself. Keep the knowledge to yourself. Stay the only one with this advantage." She hesitated. "Why share it?"

Al considered the question. "Because I don't want to be the only one who can fight. I want you to be able to fight. All of you." He met her eyes. "I'm not building a harem. I'm building a unit. And units need every member capable."

Rowena was quiet for a moment. Then she said, very softly, "You treat us like equals."

"I treat you like people," Al corrected. "There's a difference."

"Not here," Rowena replied. "Here, that's the same thing."

She picked up the pistol again and began another disassembly, her movements confident now, no longer tentative.

Al watched her work and felt something shift in the group dynamic. They'd started this journey as strangers bound by political necessity. Then as allies forced together by survival. Then as a sisterhood claiming him as theirs.

Now, maybe, they were becoming something else. Something more functional. More real.

Not quite family. Not yet.

But close enough to start building toward it.

That evening, after dinner, Rhyosyn approached Al. She didn't ask—just sat down across from him and said, "Teach me."

Al smiled faintly. "Direct. I appreciate that."

"I don't waste time," Rhyosyn replied. "And I don't like feeling helpless."

"Then let's start," Al said.

He ran her through the same progression he'd used with Rowena—nomenclature, function, safety protocols. Rhyosyn absorbed it faster, her analytical mind breaking down the weapon's operation like a spell formula.

"It's elegant," she said, reassembling the pistol for the third time. "Simple mechanics producing reliable results. Like basic magic."

"Exactly," Al agreed. "No mystery. No special talent required. Just understanding and practice."

Rhyosyn held the weapon, feeling its weight. "This scares people."

"Good weapons should," Al said. "Fear keeps you careful. Makes you think before you act."

"And if I stop being afraid?"

"Then you become dangerous," Al replied. "But you already knew that."

Rhyosyn's lips curved slightly. Not quite a smile. "Yes. I did."

They worked until dark, Rhyosyn moving from basic operation to live fire drills. She was a natural—steady hands, good breath control, patient trigger discipline. By the end of the session, she was grouping shots within a hand-span at twenty feet.

"You'll be better than me in a month," Al said.

"Is that a challenge or a prediction?" Rhyosyn asked.

"Both."

She handed the weapon back, and Al dismissed it. They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, watching the fire burn low.

"Thank you," Rhyosyn said finally.

"For what?"

"For not treating this like a gift," she said. "Or a favor. Or something you're granting us because you're generous." She looked at him. "You're teaching us because it makes tactical sense. I respect that."

"It does make tactical sense," Al confirmed. "But that's not the only reason."

"What's the other reason?"

Al was quiet for a moment. "Because if something happens to me, I want you to be able to protect yourselves. And each other."

Rhyosyn studied him. "You think something's going to happen to you."

"I think I'm walking around with a classification the System won't explain, authority I don't understand, and enough political complications to start wars," Al said. "Something's going to happen. I'd rather you be ready for it."

"Then I'll be ready," Rhyosyn said. She stood and brushed dirt from her leggings. "Good night, Al."

"Night," he replied.

She walked back to camp, her posture straighter than it had been that morning. Not because of the weapon. Because of the confidence that came with understanding it.

Al sat alone by the dying fire and thought about equality. About power that could be taught. About women who'd spent their whole lives being told they were valuable but not capable, protected but not dangerous.

He was changing that. One lesson at a time.

And maybe, in the process, they were changing him too.

Tomorrow, Elowen would ask for training. The day after, Catrin would insist on advanced techniques.

The sisterhood was becoming something more than a political construct.

They were becoming a force.

And Al was at the center of it, not as property or prize, but as the person teaching them how to be dangerous.

That felt right.

That felt like something worth building.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

CHAPTER 57

They reached the waystation two days after leaving the Sovereign Hold. It sat at the intersection of three trade roads, a fortified compound built from local stone with walls that had weathered decades of frontier exposure. Smoke rose from chimneys. The gate stood open, but guards watched from the walls.

Al studied it through the monocular. "Four guards visible. Probably more inside. They're not Crown troops—wrong armor. Local militia, maybe."

Catrin nodded. "Waystations this far west operate with semi-autonomy. They answer to the Crown, but they're mostly self-governing. Trade post, inn, message depot, and occasional court for minor disputes."

"So they'll have heard about the classification change," Rhyosyn said.

"Everyone's heard about it by now," Elowen replied. "The question is how they'll react."

Al dismissed the monocular and checked his status one more time. The experience bar had been hovering at 7,840 out of 10,000 for two days. Close. Very close. But not quite there.

"We go in together," Catrin said. "No separation. We present as a unified group. If anyone challenges us, I do the talking unless they address Al directly."

"And if they do address me?" Al asked.

"Then you answer," Catrin said. "Politely. Clearly. Don't volunteer information, but don't lie either. We're travelers seeking supplies and rest. Nothing more complicated than that."

They approached the waystation on foot, having left their minimal gear cached a mile back. Better to appear as simple travelers than as a group preparing for conflict.

The guards at the gate watched them approach with professional attention. One was older, perhaps forty, with the weathered face of someone who'd spent years at this posting. The other was younger, maybe twenty-five, her hand resting casually near her sword hilt.

The older guard stepped forward as they reached the gate. Her eyes moved over the group, counting, assessing, noting the quality of their clothes and the controlled way they moved.

"Welcome to Millford Station," she said. Her tone was neutral. "State your business."

"Resupply and rest," Catrin replied. "We've been traveling west, now heading back toward civilization. We can pay for food, lodging, and any messages held for delivery."

The guard's eyes flicked to Al, held for a moment, then returned to Catrin. "How long do you plan to stay?"

"One night," Catrin said. "Two at most."

The guard nodded slowly. "Rates are posted inside. Inn's on the right, trade post on the left. No weapons drawn within the compound unless you're defending your life. No fighting except in the designated challenge ground. No theft. Break the rules, you leave. Understood?"

"Understood," Catrin confirmed.

The guard stepped aside and gestured them through. "Safe travels."

They entered the compound. The interior was larger than it appeared from outside—a central courtyard surrounded by buildings, with covered walkways connecting them. Perhaps thirty people moved through the space: merchants, travelers, a few locals conducting business.

Several heads turned as they passed. Eyes tracked Al with open curiosity. Whispers started immediately.

Al kept his expression neutral and his hands visible. Just a traveler. Just passing through. Nothing to see here.

They reached the inn and entered. The common room was half-full, tables occupied by people eating lunch or conducting quiet business. A woman stood behind the bar—mid-fifties, built like someone who'd hauled kegs her entire life, with sharp eyes that missed nothing.

She watched them approach, her gaze settling on Al for a long moment before returning to Catrin.

"One room," Catrin said. "Four beds if you have it, or we'll make do with what's available. One night, possibly two. Meals included if available."

The innkeeper's eyes flicked between the women and Al, clearly doing math, but nodded without comment. "Six silver," she replied. "Three now, three when you leave. Meals are separate—two copper per person per meal. Bath house is out back, three copper for hot water."

Catrin counted out coins. "We'll take it."

The innkeeper took the money and produced a ledger. "Names for the record."

Catrin hesitated for only a heartbeat. "Catrin Arwen. Rhyosyn Vaughn. Elowen Pryce. Rowena Stanton. Aleric Tanim."

The innkeeper's hand paused mid-writing. Her eyes flicked up to Al again, then back to the ledger. She finished recording the names without comment, then reached under the bar and produced a sealed letter.

"This arrived three days ago," she said, holding it out to Catrin. "Addressed to 'House Arwen representatives, if passing through.'" She paused. "Sender paid premium for it to be held indefinitely."

Catrin took the letter, checking the seal. House Arwen's mark, intact. "Thank you."

The innkeeper nodded toward the stairs. "Room is upstairs. Third door on the right. Four beds, private lock. You'll share the hall facilities with other guests, so be respectful."

They climbed the stairs and found their room—larger than expected, with four beds arranged along the walls and a single window overlooking the courtyard. Catrin locked the door behind them and checked the window latch while the others surveyed the space.

"Defensible," Rhyosyn said, testing the door. "One entrance, one window. Easy to watch."

Catrin gestured to the beds. "Rowena and I take first watch. Elowen and Rhyosyn get sleep. Al, you take that bed by the window—if anyone comes through it, you'll have warning. We rotate every two hours."

No one questioned the arrangement. The innkeeper might assume Al was sharing a bed with one of them, but the reality was tactical. Four women taking turns keeping watch while Al slept was the safest configuration.

Catrin opened the letter while the others settled in.

Al watched her face as she read. Saw the tightness around her eyes, the way her jaw set.

"What does it say?" he asked.

Catrin looked up. "It's from my mother. Sent before the classification change, so it's outdated, but..." She scanned the text again. "She was advising caution. Suggesting we avoid major settlements until the feud situation clarified. And she was requesting that we send word of our location if possible."

"Can't do that now," Rhyosyn said. "Any message we send will be intercepted and analyzed by half the realm."

"I know," Catrin replied. She folded the letter and tucked it into her pack. "But it tells us something useful. The Houses were concerned even before the Hold. Now they'll be in full crisis mode."

Elowen moved to the window. "We should eat, rest, and leave at first light. The longer we stay in one place, the more chance someone decides to make a move."

"Agreed," Catrin said.

They descended to the common room and ordered food. The stew was decent, the bread fresh. Al ate mechanically, aware of eyes on him from other tables. No one approached, but the whispers continued.

He was finishing his meal when it happened.

Not an attack. Not a confrontation.

Just a shift in the air. A sense of something clicking into place.

The System notification bloomed in his vision.

[Experience Threshold Exceeded] [Level Progress: 10,000 / 10,000] [Level Increased: 2 → 3]

Al set down his spoon carefully. "I just leveled."

The women went still.

"Here?" Catrin asked quietly. "Now?"

"Yeah," Al said.

The notification continued.

[Evaluating Classification...] [Status: Sovereign Claimant (Dormant)] [Progression Path: Non-Standard] [Adjustments Required]

Al felt something shift. Not pain, exactly. More like pressure. Like the System was reaching into him and rearranging things at a fundamental level.

[Attribute Points Awarded: 12] [Summoning Capacity Increased: +150 cu in] [New Capacity: 300 cu in] [Structural Stability: Enhanced] [Authority Recognition: Improved]

The changes settled into place. Al felt... clearer. More grounded. The constant drain from summoning felt less severe. The volume constraint that had been slowly expanding suddenly doubled.

Three hundred cubic inches.

He could summon multiple weapons simultaneously. Equipment. Tools. The expansion was massive—he'd gone from barely able to manage a pistol

to having room for a full loadout.

But something else had changed too. Something harder to quantify.

He could feel people watching him. Not just physically—he'd always been aware of that. But he could sense their *attention*. Their focus. The weight of their observation.

It wasn't invasive. Just... present. Like he'd gained a new sense that made him aware of being perceived.

[New Trait Acquired: Sovereign Presence (Passive)] [Effect: Authority recognized by System-integrated individuals within range. Reactions vary by target classification and disposition.]

"Al," Elowen said quietly. "Your eyes."

"What about them?" Al asked.

"They're glowing," she said. "Just slightly. Like the inscriptions at the Hold."

Al blinked. The glow faded. "Is it gone?"

"Yes," Elowen confirmed. "But for a moment, it was there."

Around them, the common room had gone quiet. People were staring openly now. Not with hostility. With something else. Recognition, maybe. Or uncertainty.

The innkeeper approached their table. "Sir," she said, addressing Al directly for the first time. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine," Al replied. "Just tired. Long journey."

She nodded slowly, but her expression was troubled. "If you need anything, let me know." She retreated to the bar.

Whispers started again, louder this time.

"We should go upstairs," Catrin said quietly.

They returned to their room. Once the door was secured and locked, Catrin turned to Al.

"What happened?"

"Level three," Al said. He pulled up his full status and read it aloud.

[Name: Aleric Tanim] [Origin: United States of America] [Blessing: American Magic] [Affiliation: House Tanim] [Status: Sovereign Claimant (Dormant)] [Level: 3]

[Attributes:] Strength: 13 Constitution: 13 Dexterity: 12 Agility: 13 Mind: 18 Wisdom: 14 Charisma: 12 Luck: 16 Unassigned Points: 12

[Summoning Capacity: 300 cu in]

[Traits:] - Foreign Integration - Sovereign Presence (Passive)

"Three hundred cubic inches," Rhyosyn said. "That's massive. You could manifest multiple rifles, full gear loadouts, equipment we haven't even considered yet."

"And this trait," Elowen added. "Sovereign Presence. That's... that's not a standard ability. That's something nobles study for years to cultivate, and even then it's subtle."

"The System gave it to me automatically," Al said. "Part of the classification."

Catrin sat on the bed, processing. "People will feel it. Anyone with System awareness will sense that you're... different. That you have authority."

"Great," Al said flatly. "So now I'm broadcasting 'here's someone important' to everyone around me."

"It's not that obvious," Rhyosyn said. "More like... people will instinctively defer to you. Or at least hesitate before challenging you. It's a social authority trait, not a combat one."

"Still makes me more visible," Al replied.

"Yes," Catrin agreed. "It does."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"The twelve attribute points," Rowena said quietly. "What will you do with them?"

Al pulled up the allocation interface. Twelve points to distribute. His first instinct was to dump them into Mind—more summoning capacity, more control. But he forced himself to think strategically.

He needed balance. Needed to survive long enough to use the skills he had.

After a moment of consideration, he allocated:

+3 Constitution (13 → 16) - Survivability **+3 Agility** (13 → 16) - Movement, reaction time **+3 Mind** (18 → 21) - Summoning efficiency **+3 Wisdom** (14 → 17) - Judgment, awareness

The changes settled in. He felt marginally tougher, marginally faster. The summoning felt even smoother.

"Done," he said.

Catrin nodded. "Get some rest. Rowena and I have first watch. Tomorrow we decide whether to push for the capital or find somewhere less visible to wait out the political chaos."

Al took his assigned bed by the window. He could hear the quiet movements of Catrin and Rowena taking up their watch positions—one by the door, one with a view of both Al and the window. The other two women lay in their beds, resting but alert.

Professional. Disciplined. A unit that had learned to operate seamlessly.

Al closed his eyes, feeling the changes from the level-up settling into his body. Level three. Sovereign Presence. Three hundred cubic inches of summoning capacity.

He was getting stronger. More capable.

But also more visible. More valuable. More dangerous to everyone around him.

Somewhere in the compound below, people whispered about the man whose eyes had glowed. The one who traveled with four noble daughters. The one who matched descriptions that were spreading across the realm.

Al closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

Tomorrow would bring new complications.

It always did.

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

CHAPTER 58

The Grand Archive - Capital of the Triumvirate

Scholar-Matron Elara Blackwood had been working in the Grand Archive for thirty-two years. She'd cataloged bloodline records, transcribed ancient treaties, and cross-referenced prophecy texts that predated the Triumvirate by centuries.

She thought she'd seen everything.

Then the System broadcast hit, and suddenly every prophecy scholar in the capital was pulling texts she'd filed away as historical curiosities.

Now her reading room was full.

Six scholars sat around the central table, each with stacks of manuscripts, scrolls, and bound codices. They'd been working for three days straight, cross-referencing, arguing, and growing increasingly frustrated.

"The Seventh Son prophecy is clear," said Master Corin, a thin woman with ink-stained fingers. She held up a leather-bound volume. "Male lineage, foreign origin, arriving in a time of strife. It matches."

"So does the Dragon's Heir prophecy," countered Scholar Mendis, pushing a scroll across the table. "Dormant bloodline awakening, System hesitation, ancient authority recognized. Perfect match."

"You're both ignoring the Unbound Stranger," said a third scholar, Dame Wessex, tapping a codex written in archaic script. "No class, outside normal System parameters, bringing disruption to established order. That's him."

Elara pinched the bridge of her nose. "All three prophecies match because they're vague enough to match anyone unusual. That's how prophecy works—it's interpretive until it happens, then everyone claims they knew all along."

"But the specifics—" Corin began.

"The specifics contradict each other," Elara interrupted. She pulled three texts toward her and opened them side by side. "The Seventh Son prophecy says he'll 'unite fractured powers.' The Dragon's Heir says he'll 'restore what

was lost.' The Unbound Stranger says he'll 'break the chains that bind.' Those are three different outcomes."

"They could all be true," Mendis argued. "Sequential stages of the same event."

"Or," Elara replied, "they could all be wrong, and we're pattern-matching a real person to mythological frameworks that were never meant to be literal."

Dame Wessex scoffed. "The System itself recognized him as Sovereign Claimant. That's not mythology. That's legal reality."

"Which is exactly my point," Elara said. She stood and walked to the archive shelves, running her finger along spines until she found what she wanted. She pulled down five more volumes and dropped them on the table with a heavy thud.

"There are seventeen prophecies in our collection that reference foreign arrivals," she said. "Nine that mention dormant bloodlines. Twelve that describe System anomalies. Six that predict the return of lost authority." She opened the books one by one, showing marked pages. "If we cherry-pick details from each, we can make Aleric Tanim fit all of them. Or none of them. Or invent entirely new interpretations."

The scholars stared at the pile of texts.

"So what are you saying?" Corin asked quietly. "That prophecy is useless?"

"I'm saying prophecy is descriptive, not prescriptive," Elara replied. "It tells us what conditions look like, not what will happen. And right now, every power structure in this realm is trying to interpret these texts to support their preferred outcome."

She pulled a sheet of parchment from her satchel and unfolded it on the table. It was covered in neat columns of text.

"I've been tracking interpretation variance," she said. "Here's what different factions are claiming based on the same prophecies."

She pointed to the first column. "House Arwen interprets the Seventh Son as a military unifier. They think Aleric will consolidate power through martial strength and create a new imperial structure with them at the center."

Second column. "House Vaughn reads the Dragon's Heir as magical restoration. They believe he'll unlock lost knowledge and return ancient magic to the realm, with House Vaughn as the primary beneficiaries."

Third column. "House Pryce sees the Unbound Stranger as an economic disruptor. They think he'll break the guild monopolies and create new trade structures that favor independent merchants."

Fourth column. "The Clergy reads all three as spiritual renewal. They claim he's a divine agent sent to restore faith and correct the System's corruption."

She set down her quill. "Four completely different interpretations of the same texts. All internally consistent. All supported by selective reading. All contradictory."

"But one of them must be right," Mendis said.

"Why?" Elara asked. "Why must any of them be right? Why can't the truth be that Aleric Tanim is just a man who happened to trigger ancient System protocols none of us understand? Why does he have to be prophesied?"

Silence settled over the table.

Dame Wessex spoke carefully. "Because if he's not prophesied, then he's unpredictable. And unpredictable threatens everyone."

"Exactly," Elara said. "Which is why everyone's desperately trying to fit him into frameworks they understand. It's not about truth. It's about control."

Master Corin closed her book slowly. "So what do we tell the Triumvirate? They're expecting our analysis."

Elara sat back down. "We tell them the truth. That prophecy is ambiguous by nature. That multiple interpretations exist and none can be definitively proven. That trying to force Aleric Tanim into a prophetic role he may not actually occupy is likely to cause more problems than it solves."

"They won't like that answer," Mendis said.

"No," Elara agreed. "They won't. But it's the only honest one we can give."

She looked at the pile of texts on the table. Centuries of accumulated prophecy, all written in the cryptic language of mystics and seers who'd claimed to see the future.

And not one of them had predicted what would actually happen when their predictions started coming true.

Millford Waystation - Private Room

Elowen sat on her bed, watching Al sleep. He'd crashed hard after the leveling, the System changes taking their toll despite the enhanced

capabilities. His breathing was deep and even, undisturbed by the whispers that had followed them from the common room.

Catrin and Rowena were on watch, positioned by the door and window. Rhyosyn lay in her bed, but her eyes were open, staring at the ceiling.

"He doesn't know, does he," Rhyosyn said quietly.

Elowen glanced at her. "Know what?"

"What he represents," Rhyosyn replied. "What people are going to expect from him now that the System has classified him as Sovereign."

Elowen was quiet for a moment. "I don't think anyone knows what it means. Not really. The last Sovereign Claimants existed before the Triumvirate. Before most of recorded history."

"Exactly," Rhyosyn said. She sat up, pulling her knees to her chest. "Which means everyone's going to project their own interpretation onto him. Their own hopes and fears and political agendas."

"You've been thinking about this," Elowen observed.

"I've been reading about it," Rhyosyn corrected. She glanced at Catrin and Rowena to make sure they were out of earshot, then continued quietly. "My mother sent me texts when I was younger. Historical records of the Dragon Houses. How they operated. What kind of authority they held."

"And?" Elowen prompted.

"And it was complicated," Rhyosyn said. "Sovereign authority wasn't absolute. It was conditional. Based on proving worth, maintaining balance, acting in accordance with principles that predated the System itself." She looked at Al's sleeping form. "He's been classified as having that authority. But he doesn't know the rules. Doesn't know what's expected. And there's no one alive who can teach him."

Elowen felt a chill. "So he's operating blind."

"We all are," Rhyosyn replied. "But the difference is, when we make mistakes, the System corrects us. When he makes mistakes..." She trailed off.

"The System hesitates," Elowen finished. "Because it doesn't know if it has authority to correct him."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"My mother would say this is an opportunity," Elowen said quietly. "That being engaged to someone with undefined authority means we can help shape what that authority becomes."

"And my mother would say it's a responsibility," Rhyosyn added. "That we have to keep him from being corrupted or manipulated by people who want to use him."

"What do you say?" Elowen asked.

Rhyosyn was quiet for a long moment. "I say he's a person. Not a prophecy. Not a tool. Not a symbol." She looked at Elowen. "And I think that's the part everyone's going to forget."

Elowen nodded slowly. "Then we don't forget. We remind them."

"By doing what?"

"By treating him like a person," Elowen said. "By making sure he knows we're here because we choose to be, not because we're bound by politics or prophecy or anything else."

Rhyosyn studied her. "You're talking about genuine commitment."

"I'm talking about what sisterhood means," Elowen corrected. "We claimed him. That means we protect him. Not just his body, but his humanity." She paused. "Before everyone else tries to take it."

Rhyosyn lay back down, but didn't close her eyes. "You sound like you care about him."

"I'm starting to," Elowen admitted quietly. "Not because of what he represents. Because of who he is."

"That's dangerous," Rhyosyn said.

"Everything about this is dangerous," Elowen replied.

They fell silent. Across the room, Al shifted in his sleep but didn't wake. Catrin glanced back at them, met Elowen's eyes briefly, then returned her attention to the door.

Outside, in taverns and guild halls and noble estates across the realm, people were interpreting prophecies and making plans based on frameworks that might not apply.

Inside this room, four women were making a different choice.

To see the man, not the mythology.

And to hope that would be enough when the rest of the world came calling with their expectations and demands.

Elowen closed her eyes and tried to rest.

Tomorrow they'd have to decide: move toward the capital where answers waited, or stay in the borderlands where they were less visible but more vulnerable.

Either way, the prophecies would follow them.

And so would everyone who believed they knew what those prophecies meant.

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

CHAPTER 59

The camp had settled into its afternoon rhythm. Guards rotated watches, voices low, movement unhurried. Al sat apart from the others, turning over a question that had lodged itself in his thoughts and refused to leave.

Everything he had stored so far had been inert. Clothing, weapons, tools. Manufactured matter. Dead matter. The System handled it cleanly, tracking capacity, issuing confirmations, behaving as though the rules were settled and well understood. But nowhere, in any prompt or limitation he had seen, did it explicitly state that living matter was excluded. The absence bothered him. If the mechanism scaled, if his capacity ever grew enough, then someday the difference between an object and a person would stop being theoretical. Extraction, rescue, evacuation, containment. Those were not abstract concerns. Those were missions.

He waited until the camp's attention drifted elsewhere, then moved far enough away that no one would notice what he was doing. At the edge of camp he found nest three small living things, they were common to the region and unremarkable in every way save one. Six legs, fur, warm. breathing. and alive. He held it carefully, feeling the subtle resistance of a body that trusted the world enough not to panic.

Al hesitated only a moment before focusing on the familiar pressure behind his eyes, the same controlled intent he used to dismiss a weapon or stow equipment.

Store.

There was no resistance. No warning. No sensation at all. One moment the weight was there, the next his hand was empty. He did it two more times and then thought he would wait before re-summoning them.

He waited for something. No alert. No rejection. No acknowledgement of any kind came. A chill crept into his chest as he tried to retrieve them, shifting his focus, reaching for the sensation the way he would open a locker or summon stored gear.

Nothing happened.

The System had accepted the command without protest and without response, and that was worse than a denial. Either living matter was stored somewhere he could not yet access, or it had not been stored at all. There was no way to tell which.

Al closed his hand slowly and let it drop to his side. He did not repeat the experiment. Whatever boundary he had just touched, he had crossed it blind, and he had no intention of testing it again without understanding the cost. He returned to camp and forced himself to sit, to breathe, to look normal, but the question stayed with him.

Not where it went.

But what it meant that the System had let it happen.

***

Al woke to the sensation of pressure, the kind that settled behind his eyes before sound ever reached him. There was no familiar chime, no neutral acknowledgment of inventory changes or capacity adjustments. This was heavier. Intrusive. The kind of System response that bypassed courtesy and went straight to authority.

The text formed in his vision with stark clarity.

[SYSTEM NOTICE] Unauthorized biological transfer detected. Classification: Restricted. Severity: High.

Al sat upright at once, breath sharp in his chest. His mind raced back through the previous day, through the quiet experiment he had already begun to regret. The System did not accuse him of destruction. It did not flag an error or a failed attempt.

It had detected a transfer.

His gaze dropped to the next line before he could stop himself.

Destination: Protected realm.

The phrase was maddeningly vague. No name. No location. Just an implication that whatever boundary he had crossed was not merely personal or local. The System was not reacting because he had broken a rule. It was reacting because the consequences had reached somewhere they were not supposed to reach.

Another block of text followed, colder still.

[RESTRICTION IMPOSED] Observation level: Increased.

The weight of that settled slowly. He was no longer operating unnoticed. Something had logged the event. Something was now paying attention.

Al swallowed and waited, searching for clarification that did not come. No retrieval option. No status report. No indication of whether what he had sent still existed at all. The System offered judgment without explanation, and that silence was worse than any reprimand.

Then, as if to underline the point, a final advisory appeared.

[ADVISORY] Transfer mechanics do not discriminate between matter classifications. Errors propagate beyond origin context.

The words lingered just long enough to be read twice before they dissolved into nothing.

Al sat there in the dark, the sounds of the camp distant and unreal, staring at the space where the notification had been. He didn’t know where the living thing had gone. He didn’t know whether it was alive or dead. He didn’t even know if “transfer” meant storage, displacement, or something far more dangerous.

All he knew was that the System had let it happen.

He had tested a boundary he barely understood, and instead of stopping him, the System had simply recorded the outcome and raised the stakes.

Al ran a hand over his face and let out a slow, controlled breath.

He hadn’t just moved an object.

He had opened a door.

And whatever had passed through it was no longer his to control.

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Chapter Sixty

CHAPTER 60

The goblin war party hit the Queen's regiment patrol two miles west of Millford at dawn.

Al heard the horn calls first—three sharp blasts, the emergency signal. Then screams. Then the distinctive clash of steel on steel that meant close combat.

He was moving before the others were fully awake, summoning both pistols as he ran. Catrin caught up within seconds, sword already drawn. The others followed, forming up without discussion.

They reached the fight in under five minutes.

Thirty goblins, maybe more, had ambushed a patrol of twelve soldiers—all women, all wearing the Queen's colors. The soldiers had formed a defensive circle, shields locked, spears out. But they were outnumbered and already bleeding.

Three bodies lay still on the ground. Two more soldiers were down, trying to crawl toward cover while clutching their wounds.

The goblins pressed hard, using coordinated strikes to test the shield wall, probing for weaknesses.

And at the center of the formation stood something larger.

Not a goblin. Not quite. Taller than Al by half a head, broader across the shoulders, skin the color of old bronze marked with ritual scars. It wore armor that looked like it had been scavenged from a dozen different battlefields—pieces of plate, chainmail, leather, all fitted together with brutal efficiency. In one hand, it carried a cleaver-like blade that had notches along the spine, each one representing something Al didn't want to think about.

A chieftain. A warlord.

And it was laughing.

The sound cut through the combat—deep, resonant, mocking. Every time a soldier struck at it, the blade turned aside. Not blocked. Just... redirected, as if the air itself refused to let steel touch flesh.

One soldier—braver or more desperate than the others—thrust her spear directly at the chieftain's throat.

The spear snapped.

Not broke. Snapped. The metal shaft fractured like rotten wood, splinters flying. The soldier stumbled back, staring at the broken weapon in shock.

The chieftain backhanded her casually. She flew ten feet and didn't get up.

Al didn't announce himself. Didn't shout warnings.

Just opened fire.

The first two goblins dropped before the others realized they were being flanked. Al shifted targets, firing controlled pairs, forcing the attackers to split their attention.

Catrin hit the enemy line from the side, her blade taking down a goblin attempting to flank the injured soldiers. Rhyosyn and Elowen moved to protect the fallen, while Rowena covered their retreat with her crossbow.

The goblin formation fractured. Half turned to face the new threat. The other half tried to maintain pressure on the soldiers.

It was the wrong choice. Split focus meant neither group could commit fully.

Al dropped three more goblins, advancing steadily, forcing them back. The soldiers recognized the opportunity and pushed forward, shields slamming into disorganized enemies.

The chieftain bellowed something in a language Al didn't understand. The remaining goblins scattered, creating space.

Then the chieftain turned its full attention to Al.

It moved fast—faster than something that size should move. It closed the distance in three long strides, the cleaver blade coming down in an overhead arc that would have split Al from shoulder to hip.

Al sidestepped, raised his pistol, and put three rounds center mass.

The chieftain staggered.

But it didn't fall.

Al could see the impact points—torn cloth, blood welling. But the creature just shook its head like it had been stung by an insect and charged again.

Al emptied the magazine. Nine shots. All hits. Chest, throat, face.

The chieftain slowed. Stumbled. But kept coming.

"What the hell?" Al muttered, ejecting the empty magazine.

Catrin appeared beside him, sword raised. "Don't waste ammunition! It's protected!"

"Protected how?"

"Ancient blood! Prophecy! I don't know!" Catrin swung hard, her blade connecting with the chieftain's ribs. Sparks flew. The sword bounced off as if striking stone. "No mortal weapon can kill it!"

The chieftain laughed again—wet now, blood in its throat, but still mocking. It spoke, the words guttural and thick with accent but understandable.

"No child of this realm can strike me down."

It swung. Catrin barely ducked under the cleaver.

"The old words bind," the chieftain continued, advancing on her. "No daughter born beneath these skies... no son of crowned blood... none may end me while stars still turn."

Al slammed a fresh magazine home and fired again.

Headshot. Clean. The chieftain's head snapped back.

It stumbled, went to one knee.

And slowly, impossibly, started to rise again.

"You see?" it said, spitting blood. "The pact holds. I cannot—"

Al shot it again. And again. And again.

The chieftain's head came apart.

It toppled backward and lay still.

Silence fell over the battlefield.

The goblins stared. The soldiers stared. Even Catrin stared.

Then one of the goblins made a sound—high-pitched, almost like a bird's call. The others took it up, and suddenly they were running. Not retreating tactically. Running. Scattering into the forest in every direction, abandoning the wounded, abandoning their dead chieftain, fleeing like the world itself had broken.

Al lowered his pistol slowly. "What just happened?"

Catrin was staring at the chieftain's corpse. "That... that shouldn't be possible."

"I shot it. It died. Seems pretty straightforward."

"No." Catrin's voice was tight. "You don't understand. That was Broken-Tusk. Chieftain of the Red Hills clans. He's been raiding this region for twenty years. He's killed dozens of soldiers. Hundreds. Every attempt to end him has failed."

"Well, it didn't fail this time," Al said.

"Because it should have!" Rhyosyn appeared, breathless, eyes wide. "Broken-Tusk is protected by ancient covenant. 'No child of the realm may slay him.' It's in the histories. It's documented. Three separate Houses have tried to assassinate him. All failed. Not because he was too skilled. Because the weapons literally couldn't harm him."

Al looked down at his pistol. "These aren't from this realm."

"Neither are you," Elowen said quietly. She was staring at him with an expression Al couldn't read. "You're not a child of this realm. You're not born beneath these skies."

The patrol captain approached slowly, her face pale. "The old texts... there are exceptions. Loopholes in the ancient bindings." She looked at Al. "But they require specific conditions. Bloodlines that predate the covenant. Or..."

She trailed off.

"Or what?" Al asked.

"Seventh sons," Catrin said. Her voice had gone flat. "Seventh sons bypass covenant magic. They exist outside normal lineage restrictions. It's why they show up in prophecies—they're the loopholes the old world wrote into itself."

Rowena lowered her crossbow. "You're a seventh son."

It wasn't a question.

Al opened his mouth. Closed it. "My father had six sons before me. I'm the youngest. But I don't—"

"It doesn't matter if you believe it," Rhyosyn interrupted. "You just killed something that literally could not be killed by anyone born to this world. That's not combat skill. That's not foreign weapons. That's you breaking rules that were supposed to be absolute."

The silence stretched.

Then one of the wounded soldiers spoke, her voice weak but clear. "The stars aligned for him. The prophecy bent."

Al turned to look at her. "What?"

"Old saying," the soldier said. "When something impossible happens... it means the stars aligned. It means someone who shouldn't exist... does."

They didn't have time to process it.

The wounded needed treatment. Al moved to help them, his hands steady even as his mind raced.

He knelt beside the first wounded soldier—a young woman, maybe twenty, with a spear wound through her abdomen. Bleeding heavily. Going into shock.

"I need supplies," Al said to Catrin. "Everything we have for wounds. And I need light."

Within minutes, his group had set up a makeshift aid station. Al worked with controlled efficiency, applying pressure, packing wounds, establishing priorities.

The abdominal wound was worst. Without surgery, she'd die. With surgery in these conditions, she'd probably die. But probably was better than certainly.

"I need a sterile kit," Al said. "Surgical tools. Sutures. Antibiotics if possible."

Catrin looked at him. "We don't have that."

"Then I get it," Al replied.

He closed his eyes and reached for the summoning. Not weapons this time. Medical equipment. He remembered the exact field surgery kits he needed. He focused on the memory. The need.

The System resisted briefly—this was larger than normal, more complex—but his expanded capacity made it possible.

The kit materialized in his hands. A complete field surgery package, sealed and sterile.

The Queen's soldiers stared.

Al ignored them and opened the kit. "I need boiled water. Clean cloth. And someone with steady hands to assist."

Elowen moved forward without hesitation. "Tell me what to do."

Rhyosyn knelt on the other side of the wounded soldier. "I can help. I have healing magic—not much, but enough to stabilize and close minor wounds."

Al glanced at her. "Can you keep her stable during surgery?"

"I can try," Rhyosyn said. She placed her hands over the soldier's abdomen, not touching the wound but hovering just above it. A faint blue glow emanated from her palms. "I'm slowing the bleeding, keeping her from going deeper into shock. But I can't heal an injury this severe—just buy you time."

"Time is what I need," Al said.

He worked for twenty minutes, hands steady despite exhaustion, while Rhyosyn maintained her spell. He'd never done abdominal surgery before, but he'd seen it done, knew the principles, and had no other choice.

The soldier survived the procedure. Rhyosyn's magic had kept her stable long enough for Al to repair the damage. Once he'd closed the wound, Rhyosyn placed her hands directly on the sutured area and pushed more healing into it—not enough to close it completely, but enough to seal the worst bleeding and begin the healing process.

"That's all I can do," Rhyosyn said, pulling back, exhausted. "The rest is up to her body."

"You gave her a chance," Al said. "That's more than she had."

He treated the other wounded with supplies from the kit—cleaning wounds, applying proper bandages, and administering antibiotics from doses meant for Marines. Rhyosyn moved between them, using her remaining magical reserves to accelerate healing where she could, focusing on stopping bleeding and preventing shock.

When he finished, his hands were covered in blood that wasn't quite the right color: darker, thicker. The way it dried on his skin felt wrong.

He cleaned his hands as best he could and turned to the captain.

"You need to get them to proper care. Now."

"We will," the captain said. She looked at Al with something between awe and fear. "What are you?"

"Tired," Al replied.

The captain shook her head slowly. "You killed Broken-Tusk. Twenty years we've been trying. Three assassination attempts. Two failed sieges. We lost a full company trying to storm his camp five years ago." She paused. "And you just... shot him."

"He's not the first thing I've shot," Al said.

"But he was protected, bound by an old covenant. 'No child of the realm may slay him.' It's been absolute law for two decades." The captain's eyes were wide. "How?"

Al didn't answer. Didn't know how to.

The captain nodded slowly. "I'm required to report this engagement to my commanding officer, including your involvement. Including Broken-Tusk's death." She paused. "The Queen will want to know who ended a twenty-year problem with six bullets."

"Do what you have to do," Al said.

They helped load the wounded onto makeshift stretchers. The patrol departed, moving carefully, leaving their dead—and Broken-Tusk's corpse—for later recovery.

Al's group remained, standing in a field marked by goblin bodies and blood-stained grass.

"You saved them," Rowena said quietly.

"I kept them alive long enough for someone else to save them," Al corrected. "There's a difference."

Catrin approached him, her expression unreadable. "You took a risk summoning medical equipment in front of witnesses."

"They were dying," Al said. "Risk accepted."

"The Queen's officers will want to talk to you now," Catrin replied. "Officially. You can't avoid it anymore."

Al looked at the blood on his hands. Not all of it was goblin. Some was human. The red looked normal. The other—the goblin blood—looked darker, almost purple in the morning light.

Broken-Tusk's blood was almost black.

"I know," he said.

The scholar arrived at sunset.

There was no announcement, no escort. Just a woman on horseback, riding into the edge of the camp as if she had always intended to be there. She dismounted without haste, reins looped neatly, movements precise in a way that suggested long practice and no wasted effort.

She was older, or perhaps simply ageless. Gray hair pulled back tightly. Robes plain but well made, marked with symbols Al did not recognize but instinctively distrusted. Her eyes were sharp, not curious. Evaluative.

“Corporal Aleric Tanim,” she said.

Not a question.

Al stood. “Who’s asking?”

“Keeper Morrigan,” she replied. “Archive of Fulfilled Prophecy.”

That earned silence.

“I came,” Morrigan continued, “because something occurred this morning that should not have been able to occur.” She looked past Al, toward the distant treeline where the goblins had fled. “Broken-Tusk of the Red Hills clans is dead.”

No one spoke.

“That fact alone would not merit my presence,” she said calmly. “Broken-Tusk was always expected to fall. Eventually. What matters is *how* he fell.”

She stepped closer to the fire and produced a small leather journal, opening it with practiced ease.

“Broken-Tusk was bound by the Covenant of Unending Night,” Morrigan said. “A tri-circle binding placed forty-three years ago. Its language was explicit: *no child born beneath the sovereign stars of this realm, no heir of crowned blood, no warrior of mortal making may strike him down while the covenant holds.*”

She looked up.

“The covenant did not fail. It was not broken. It was bypassed.”

Catrin drew a slow breath. “That’s… not possible.”

“It is rare,” Morrigan corrected. “Not impossible.”

She turned her gaze back to Al. “This morning, a fixed condition in the prophetic record advanced. A restriction that has held for decades did not apply. A safeguard failed to engage.”

Al frowned. “You’re saying the prophecy moved.”

“Yes,” Morrigan said. “And more importantly, it moved *without satisfying any known local lineage condition*.”

She flipped several pages in the journal.

“There are recorded exceptions to covenant bindings,” she continued. “Extremely few. They are not tied to identity, but to exclusion. Individuals who fall outside the definitions the covenant relies upon. The most infamous of those exclusions are attributed to what the old texts call *seventh-son conditions*.”

The words settled heavily.

Rhyosyn spoke carefully. “You’re saying the condition was met.”

“I’m saying the *exclusion resolved*,” Morrigan replied. “The archive records outcomes, not bloodlines. We do not identify carriers. We record when something that should not have happened… happens.”

She closed the journal.

“For three generations, prophecies requiring seventh-son exclusions have stalled. Not failed. Stalled. Waiting for a condition that could no longer be verified, let alone fulfilled.”

Her eyes returned to Al.

“This morning, one of those stalled sequences advanced.”

Silence stretched.

Al felt it then, the subtle shift. Not awe. Not destiny.

Weight.

“I know my mother,” he said flatly. “She has no other children. And I don’t know who my father is.”

Morrigan nodded once. “That uncertainty is consistent with the archival record.”

“That’s it?” Al asked. “You don’t know what I am. You just know something happened.”

“Yes,” Morrigan said. “And that is worse.”

She gestured broadly, encompassing the camp, the dead goblins, the fleeing warband, the distant roads that would soon carry word.

“Power structures do not require certainty to act,” she continued. “They require precedent. Broken-Tusk’s death is now recorded as the first confirmed case in three generations where a seventh-son exclusion applied. Every House, every court, every faction that has been waiting on stalled outcomes will know that a lock has opened.”

Catrin’s jaw tightened. “They’ll come looking.”

“They already are,” Morrigan said. “Not for what you *are*. For what you *enable*.”

She mounted her horse.

“You are not chosen,” she said to Al. “You are not blessed. You are not even identified.”

She paused.

“You are required.”

With that, she turned and rode into the gathering dark.

The fire crackled. Nobody spoke.

Finally, Catrin broke the silence.

"She's right. By morning, every power structure in the realm will know something happened somewhere. And they'll all want to control what happens next."

"Because I'm a seventh son," Al said flatly.

"Because you make things possible that shouldn't be," Rhyosyn corrected. "That's power. Not the kind you wield. The kind you enable. And people will kill for that."

Al looked at his hands, still stained with blood—goblin, human—the dark, near-black that had come from Broken-Tusk.

He'd killed something that couldn't be killed.

Not because he was strong.
Because he was the right statistical accident at the right time.
Required.
Not chosen.
The weight of that settled over him like iron.

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Chapter Sixty-One

CHAPTER 61

The scholar had given Al no comfort. No reassurance. Just a cold assessment delivered in a voice that might have been discussing crop yields.

"You are not chosen. You are required."

The words stayed with him long after she had gone.

Required. Not by destiny. Not by prophecy. By statistical accident. A seventh son, meeting conditions that had stalled for generations. A biological key that happened to fit locks nobody remembered making.

The others felt it too. The shift. The weight of what had been said settling over the camp like frost.

Catrin moved differently now. Her eyes tracked movement beyond the perimeter with new intensity. She positioned herself between Al and the road without appearing to, her hand never far from her sword.

Rowena had stopped making jokes.

Elowen watched the horizons.

Even Rhyosyn—who never shut up about anything—had gone quiet.

Al sat by the rekindled fire, cleaning his pistol with mechanical precision. The familiar motions usually helped him think. Today they just gave his hands something to do while his mind churned.

"You're being watched," Catrin said quietly.

Al didn't look up. "By you?"

"By everyone." She sat down across from him, close enough that her voice wouldn't carry. "Word travels fast in the Triumvirate. A scholar from the Archive doesn't ride out to the borderlands for casual conversation. People will ask what she said. What she confirmed."

"And what was confirmed?" Al asked, still focused on the pistol.

"That you're not just valuable. You're necessary." Catrin's tone was flat, but her jaw was tight. "There's a difference. Valuable things can be replaced. Necessary things..." She trailed off.

"Can't be allowed to die," Al finished.

"Can't be allowed to choose," she corrected.

That made him look up.

Catrin met his eyes steadily. "You're a seventh son who fulfills prophecies just by existing. Do you understand what that means politically? Every unresolved seventh-son prophecy in the realm now points to you. Not because you're special. Because you're the only key that fits."

"Lucky me," Al muttered.

"No." Catrin leaned forward. "Luck has nothing to do with it. This is obligation. Burden. The kind that gets men locked in towers 'for their own protection' until they've sired enough heirs to satisfy the realm's need for stability."

Al's hands stilled on the pistol. "They'd imprison me?"

"They'd *protect* you," Catrin said. "Call it sanctuary. Call it honored service. Call it whatever pretty lie makes it easier to swallow. But yes. If the Triumvirate decides you're too important to risk, you'll spend the rest of your life in a gilded cage."

Rhyosyn appeared from the direction of the supply wagon, her expression grim. "She's right. I've been thinking about it all night. If you die, the prophecies don't just fail—they fracture. They go dormant again. Maybe for another century. The realm can't afford that kind of instability."

"So I'm insurance," Al said flatly.

"You're a foundation stone," Elowen added, approaching with a waterskin. "Except foundation stones don't walk away once they're set."

Al reassembled the pistol with sharp, controlled movements. "I'm not staying in anyone's tower."

"You might not have a choice," Rowena said from her position near the horses. "Protection isn't always optional."

The word hung in the air like a threat.

Al stood abruptly. "I didn't ask for this."

"None of us did," Catrin replied. "But here we are."

The first protection offer arrived before noon.

A rider in House Vaughn colors, in official livery, carrying sealed documents approached the camp slowly, hands visible, movements non-threatening.

"Message for Corporal Aleric Tanim," she announced formally. "From the Archive, delivered through House Vaughn's diplomatic channels."

Rhyosyn stepped forward to receive it, her expression unreadable. She broke the seal, read quickly, then her face went pale.

"What is it?" Al asked.

Rhyosyn didn't answer immediately. She just handed him the document.

It was brief, professionally worded, and absolutely terrifying in its implications.

Pursuant to Archival Decree 447-C, the individual designated as Aleric Tanim, Foreign Integration (Prototype), Seventh Son (Confirmed), is hereby designated as a Protected Asset of the Realm.

Immediate relocation to secure facilities is recommended.

Armed escort will be provided.

Compliance is appreciated. Resistance will be noted.

Al read it twice. "Protected Asset."

"It's worse than it sounds," Rhyosyn said quietly. "That's Archive language. When they designate someone as a Protected Asset, it means the person's safety supersedes their autonomy. They're saying you're too important to be allowed free movement."

"They can't just—"

"They can," Catrin interrupted. "And they will if they think you're at risk. The Archive has authority over matters of prophecy and lineage. If they decide you need protection, they'll provide it, whether you want it or not."

The messenger cleared her throat. "I'm instructed to wait for a response."

"Tell them we're considering it," Rhyosyn said.

"I was told to expect immediate compliance or formal refusal," the messenger replied. "Those are the only two acceptable responses."

Catrin's hand moved to her sword. "Then you'll be waiting a while."

The messenger's eyes flicked to the weapon, then back to Rhyosyn. "I'll return at sunset for your answer. Please understand—refusal will trigger escalated protocols."

She turned and rode away without waiting for acknowledgment.

Elowen watched her go. "Escalated protocols. That's not a threat. That's a promise."

"They'll send soldiers next," Rowena said. "Probably a full company. Frame it as protective custody. Bring him in 'for his safety.'"

Al looked at the document again. The language was polite, professional, and absolutely unyielding.

"What happens if I refuse?" he asked.

"They keep escalating," Catrin said. "Bigger escorts. Stronger language. Eventually, they stop asking and just take you. Call it emergency protective measures. The Archive has done it before."

"To whom?"

"Bloodline heirs during succession crises. Mages who developed dangerous abilities. Anyone the realm decided was too valuable to lose." Catrin's jaw tightened. "They don't call it imprisonment. They call it sanctuary. But the doors lock from the outside."

Al sat down slowly, the weight of it pressing on him. He'd survived combat. Survived being thrown into another world. Survived political schemes and blood feuds.

Now he was being told he'd survived too well. Become too important. And that importance was about to cost him the only thing he had left: freedom.

"There has to be another option," he said.

"There is," a voice said from the edge of camp.

They all turned.

A woman stood there—older, gray-haired, wearing the formal robes of a Triumvirate magistrate. She approached slowly, hands clasped in front of her, her expression neutral.

"Magistrate Corwin," she introduced herself. "I represent the Judiciary, not the Archive. I came to deliver a different offer."

"Another protection demand?" Al asked.

"A marriage contract," Corwin replied.

The camp went completely silent.

Corwin continued as though she'd announced the weather. "The Archive's approach is... blunt. Effective, but blunt. The Judiciary prefers legal solutions. If you were formally bound to a House—or multiple Houses—through marriage, you'd have familial protection. Legal standing. The Archive couldn't simply take you. You'd belong to a network, not to the realm."

"Belong," Al repeated, the word tasting bitter.

"Have allegiance to," Corwin corrected smoothly. "It's not ownership. It's mutual obligation. You provide heir potential and prophecy fulfillment. They provide legal shield and political backing."

Rhyosyn's eyes narrowed. "Who's making this offer?"

"All of them," Corwin said. "Separately. House Pryce, House Arwen, House Vaughn, House Aurum. Even House Stanton has submitted a petition. They've all realized what you are. And they all want to claim you before the Archive does."

Al stood. "I'm not getting married to avoid imprisonment."

"Then you'll be imprisoned to avoid assassination," Corwin said bluntly. "Because if the Houses can't claim you, some of them will decide you're better dead than unclaimed. At least then the prophecies go dormant cleanly instead of pointing to someone they can't control."

The words landed like a physical blow.

"They'd kill him?" Elowen whispered.

"Some would," Corwin confirmed. "Not all. But enough. That's why the Archive wants you contained. Not to protect the realm from you. To protect you from the realm."

Al looked at Catrin. At Rhyosyn. At the others. They'd gone pale.

"This is insane," he said.

"This is necessary," Corwin replied. "You have three choices: Archive custody, marriage bonds, or constant threat of assassination. Pick one. Because doing nothing defaults to the first option, and the Archive doesn't negotiate."

She produced a sealed document from her robes and set it on a supply crate.

"That's the Judiciary's formal offer. Multiple marriage bonds under Crown oversight. Not ownership—partnership. You'd have legal protection, political backing, and the Houses would be too invested in your survival to let anything happen to you."

"And in return?" Al asked.

"You produce heirs. You fulfill prophecies. You become the living bridge between competing interests." Corwin's expression didn't change. "It's not freedom. But it's better than a cage."

She turned to leave, then paused.

"The messenger returns at sunset. The Archive will want your answer then. Choose quickly, Corporal Tanim. Because after tonight, the choice won't be yours anymore."

She walked away.

The document sat on the crate, untouched.

They gathered around it after Corwin left. Nobody touched it. Nobody spoke for a long time.

Finally, Catrin broke the silence.

"She's right about one thing. If you refuse the Archive, you'll be running for the rest of your life. And if the Houses decide you're a threat, you'll be fighting back."

"I've been fighting since I got here," Al said.

"Not like this." Catrin's voice was firm. "This won't be soldiers you can shoot. It'll be poison. Accidents. Ambushes by people you thought were allies. You'll never know who's protecting you and who's waiting for the right moment."

Rhyosyn picked up the document carefully, as if it might bite. "The marriage bonds... they're not as bad as they sound. Technically, they create mutual obligation. The Houses can't discard you without losing their investment. And you'd have resources. Backing. Legal standing."

"I'd have owners," Al corrected.

"You'd have family," Elowen said quietly. "That's different."

"Is it?" Al looked at each of them. "Because from where I stand, everyone wants to control what I do. The Archive wants me locked up. The Houses want me married off. Nobody's asking what I want."

"What do you want?" Rowena asked.

"To not be property," Al said. "To make my own choices. To live without being told I'm too important to have freedom."

Catrin met his eyes. "Then you need to understand something. As long as you're alone, you're vulnerable. But if you bind yourself to people who need you alive—who'd lose everything if you died—then you're protected by their self-interest. It's not nobility. It's pragmatism. But it's real."

"She's saying," Rhyosyn added carefully, "that marriage bonds might be the only way to stay both alive and free. Because the alternative is the Archive's cage or an assassin's blade."

Al looked at the sealed document again.

Multiple marriage bonds under Crown oversight.

Not ownership—partnership.

He'd heard that lie before. Phrased differently, but still the same fundamental transaction: surrender your autonomy and we'll keep you safe.

Except this time, refusing meant worse options.

The Archive's "protection."

Houses deciding he was too dangerous to live.

A lifetime of running from people who saw him as a problem to solve permanently.

"This is what they meant," he said slowly. "When the scholar said I was required. This is what being necessary looks like. No freedom. No choice. Just different kinds of cages."

"Yes," Catrin said. "That's exactly what it looks like."

Al sat down heavily. The pistol was still in his hand—cleaned, loaded, and useless against the kind of threats he was facing now.

"There has to be another way," he said.

"If you find it," Rowena replied, "tell us. Because from where I stand, you're choosing between bad options and worse ones."

The sun moved across the sky. Noon became afternoon.

And the sealed document sat on the crate, unopened.

Waiting for an answer Al didn't know how to give.

Sunset came too quickly.

The messenger returned as promised, riding into camp with the same formal bearing as before.

"I'm here for Corporal Tanim's response," she announced.

Al stood. He'd spent the afternoon thinking, weighing, calculating, trying to find an angle that didn't exist.

"Tell the Archive—" he started.

"Wait," Catrin interrupted.

She stepped forward, placing herself between Al and the messenger.

"Before he answers," she said, "I want to make something clear. To you, to the Archive, and to anyone else listening."

The messenger frowned. "I'm here for his response, not yours."

"Then you'll get his response after you hear mine." Catrin's voice carried the command authority of someone accustomed to being obeyed. "My name is Catrin Arwen, daughter of House Arwen, betrothed to Corporal Tanim by Crown decree."

That made the messenger pause. "I'm aware of the arrangement."

"Good. Then you'll understand when I say this: we're not your property. Not mine. Not his. Not the Archive's." Catrin's hand rested on her sword—not threatening, just present. "He's been designated a Protected Asset. Fine. But so have I. So have my sisters-in-bond. The Crown made us his family. Which means touching him means going through us."

Rhyosyn stepped up beside her. "House Vaughn concurs."

Elowen moved to Al's other side. "House Pryce stands with him."

Rowena stayed where she was, crossbow visible. "House Stanton will not yield him without cause."

The messenger looked at all of them, her expression unreadable. "The Archive has authority over Protected Assets."

"And we have authority over our own bonds," Catrin replied. "Test it if you want. But understand: we're not handing him over because you demand it. If the Archive wants him, they negotiate. With all of us."

The messenger was silent for a long moment.

Then she nodded slowly. "I'll convey your position."

"Do that," Catrin said. "And tell them something else: he's not going into anyone's cage. Not theirs. Not ours. We'll protect him. But we won't own him."

She looked back at Al.

"Even if they force the marriage bonds," she said quietly, "that doesn't make you property. It makes you family. And family doesn't get locked in towers. Not while we're standing."

Al stared at her. At all of them.

They'd just taken a stand. Against the Archive. Against political pressure. Against the entire weight of the realm's need to control what it considered necessary.

For him.

Not because they loved him. Not because they wanted him.

Because ownership was wrong, no matter how it was justified.

The messenger cleared her throat. "I still need a response."

Al looked at Catrin, then at the others. They were watching him. Waiting. Trusting him to choose.

He took a breath.

"Tell the Archive," he said slowly, "that I decline protective custody. I'll take my chances out here."

The messenger's expression tightened. "That will trigger escalation protocols."

"Let them escalate," Al said. "I'm not going quietly."

The messenger nodded curtly, turned, and rode away.

Silence settled over the camp.

Then Rowena laughed—a short, sharp sound. "Well. That's one way to start a war with the Archive."

"Not a war," Catrin corrected. "A negotiation. They want him contained. We want him autonomous. Somewhere in between is a solution that doesn't involve cages or coffins."

"You really think they'll negotiate?" Elowen asked.

"They have to," Rhyosyn said. "Because if they try to take him by force, they'll have to go through four Houses. And that's a conflict even the Archive can't afford."

Al looked at them—these women who'd been thrust into his life by political decree, who had every reason to see him as a burden or a tool, yet had just put themselves between him and institutional power.

"Why?" he asked. "Why take that risk?"

Catrin met his eyes. "Because you were right. Back when you first arrived, when you said no one owns you. You were right. And if we let them take you—if we let them turn you into a thing instead of a person—then we're complicit. We become part of the system that treats people as resources."

She paused.

"I won't be that," she said. "Even if the alternative is harder."

The others nodded.

And for the first time since the scholar had left, Al felt something other than trapped.

Not free. Not yet.

But not alone.

And that was something.

The night came on slowly. Guards were posted. Fire was lit. The camp settled into watchful rest.

But everyone knew: the Archive would respond. The Houses would maneuver. The realm would push back.

And somewhere in the middle of it all, a man who'd never asked to be necessary was learning what it cost to refuse being caged.

The price was high.

But paying it meant staying human.

And that, Al decided, was worth fighting for.

Even if the fight never ended.

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Chapter Sixty-Two

CHAPTER 62

The Archive's response arrived at dawn.

Not soldiers. Not magistrates. Just a single rider in neutral gray, carrying a sealed message that Al read twice before passing it to Catrin.

"Protective custody deferred pending review," he summarized. "They're not backing down. Just... pausing."

"Because we made it costly," Catrin said. "But they'll come back. With better arguments and more pressure."

"How long do we have?"

"Days. Maybe a week." She looked at the camp—the makeshift defenses, the watch rotations, the exhaustion settling into everyone's posture. "We can't stay here. Too exposed. Too predictable."

"Where do we go?"

"Somewhere smaller. Defensible. Off the main roads." Catrin folded the message. "I know a place. An old waystation in the hills. Abandoned but structurally sound. We can hold there while we figure out our next move."

Al nodded. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight. After dark. Less chance of being followed."

They packed in silence, moving with the efficiency of people who had learned not to waste motion. By sunset, everything was secured. By full dark, they were moving.

The waystation was exactly as Catrin described—small, defensible, and isolated. A single stone structure built into the hillside, designed for travelers who needed shelter during winter passes. Two rooms. A fireplace. Shuttered windows that faced downslope, providing clear sightlines.

And not nearly enough space for five people trying to maintain professional distance.

"We rotate watches," Catrin announced once they'd secured the door. "Two-hour shifts. Two on watch, three resting. Al, you take the first watch with me. We need to establish patrol routes before the others start."

Al didn't argue. He just grabbed his rifle and followed her outside.

The night was clear and cold. Stars overhead. Wind rustled through the pines. The kind of quiet that felt peaceful until you remembered what you were watching for.

Catrin led him around the perimeter, pointing out sight lines, natural approaches, and places where the terrain funneled movement. Her voice was low and professional, the tone of someone briefing a fellow soldier.

"The ridge gives us early warning," she said, gesturing to the high ground to the east. "Anyone coming from that direction, we'll see them before they see us."

"And from the west?"

"Steep drop. Too exposed. They'd have to come around, which gives us time." She paused at the southern approach. "This is the weak point. The forest comes close. Good cover for anyone moving carefully."

Al studied it. "Tripwires?"

"If we had the supplies." Catrin glanced at him. "Can you summon wire?"

"Maybe. Haven't tried." He focused briefly, reaching for the familiar sensation. "String, yes. Fishing line, yes. Actual wire..." He felt resistance. "Too complex. Or I'm too tired."

"Fishing line works," Catrin said. "We set it low, between trees. Not to stop anyone—just to warn us."

They worked in companionable silence, stringing the line at shin height, tying it to branches that would shake and rattle if disturbed. It wasn't sophisticated, but it was better than nothing.

When they finished, Catrin checked her watch—an actual watch, Al noticed, probably summoned from somewhere—and nodded. "Thirty minutes left in our shift. We should walk the perimeter once more."

They walked.

The night settled around them. Their footsteps were soft on the pine needles. Somewhere in the distance, an owl called.

"You don't have to do this," Al said finally.

Catrin glanced at him. "Do what?"

"Stand between me and the Archive. Risk your House's standing. Any of it."

She was quiet for a long moment. Then: "You think I'm doing this for you?"

"Aren't you?"

"No." Catrin stopped walking. "I'm doing it because the alternative is accepting that people are property. That necessity justifies ownership. That we can trade human beings like currency as long as we dress it up in legal language."

She looked at him directly.

"You're not the only one trapped by this system, Al. We all are. The fiancées, the marriage decree, the entire structure—it treats us like breeding stock with expensive pedigrees. The only difference is you're new enough to see how wrong it is." She paused. "I've been here my whole life. I stopped seeing it years ago. Until you showed up and refused to pretend it was normal."

Al met her eyes. "I'm not trying to be noble."

"I know. That's why it matters." Catrin started walking again. "Noble people make speeches. You just refuse to accept cages. It's... refreshing."

They completed the circuit in silence.

As they approached the waystation door, Catrin stopped him with a light touch on his arm. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not making this easy. For not just accepting the marriage bonds and settling into comfortable captivity." She smiled faintly. "It would have been simpler. But I think we'd have hated ourselves for it."

"We?" Al asked.

"All of us." Catrin opened the door. "Come on. Let's wake Rhyosyn and Elowen for second watch."

Inside, the others had arranged sleeping spaces with careful consideration for privacy. Three bedrolls on one side of the room, separated by hung cloaks. Two on the other, with similar makeshift dividers.

Rhyosyn and Elowen were already stirring, anticipating the watch change.

"Quiet out there?" Rhyosyn asked, tying back her hair.

"For now," Catrin replied. "The forest approach is the weak point. If you hear the fishing line rattling, wake everyone. Don't investigate alone."

Elowen nodded, buckling on her sword belt. "Understood."

They slipped out into the night.

Al moved toward his designated sleeping area, but Catrin caught his arm again. "Wait."

He turned.

She was looking at the sleeping arrangements with a frown. "This isn't going to work long-term."

"What isn't?"

"Pretending we're not all in the same situation. Maintaining formal distance like we're strangers assigned to the same barracks." She gestured at the divided room. "We're supposed to be married, or engaged, or whatever legal fiction the Crown is using. But we're acting like we don't even know each other."

"You want to change that?"

"I want to be practical." Catrin sat down on one of the bedrolls. "We're going to be in close quarters for days. Maybe weeks. Maintaining rigid separation is exhausting and pointless. We should..." She trailed off, searching for words. "We should at least try to be comfortable around each other."

Al sat down across from her, leaving a respectful distance. "What does that look like?"

"I don't know." Catrin pulled her knees up, wrapping her arms around them. "Talking, maybe. Actually getting to know each other instead of just existing in parallel."

"About what?"

"Anything." She smiled slightly. "Tell me about Earth. What's it like?"

Al considered that. "Crowded. Faster. Everyone's connected all the time through technology. Communication is instant. Travel that would take weeks here takes hours."

"Sounds overwhelming."

"It is. Was." Al looked at his hands. "But you get used to it. The noise. The pace. The constant information."

"Do you miss it?"

"Parts of it." He thought about that. "I miss knowing how things work. Understanding the rules. Here, I'm improvising constantly. Guessing. Hoping I don't violate some custom I don't even know exists."

Catrin nodded slowly. "That must be exhausting."

"It is."

"What do you miss most?"

Al was quiet for a long moment. "Anonymity. Being just another guy. Not special. Not needed. Just... one Marine among thousands. Doing my job. Going home. Existing without everyone watching."

"I can't imagine that," Catrin said softly. "I've been watched my entire life. Evaluated. Judged. Every action assessed for what it means for House Arwen's standing."

"That sounds exhausting too."

"It is." She smiled without humor. "Maybe that's why we're both so tired."

They sat in comfortable silence. Outside, the wind picked up, whistling through the pines. The waystation creaked slightly, settling.

"Can I ask you something?" Al said finally.

"Yes."

"Why did you agree to the marriage decree? You could have refused. Made your House fight it."

Catrin was quiet for so long that Al thought she might not answer. Then: "Because refusing would have meant war. Between Houses. The Crown would have fractured. And in that chaos, men like you would have been the first casualties. Claimed. Controlled. Or killed to prevent claiming."

She looked at him.

"I chose the cage I could see over the chaos I couldn't control. At least this way, you're alive. At least this way, there's a chance to change things eventually."

Al absorbed that. "You're playing a long game."

"I'm surviving," Catrin corrected. "Same as you. Just with different tools."

The door opened. Rowena slipped inside, moving quietly. She nodded to them both, then settled into her own sleeping area without comment.

Catrin stood. "I should sleep. Tomorrow's going to be long."

"Yeah."

She paused at her bedroll. "Al?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're here. Even with all the complications. Even with everything being impossible." She smiled slightly. "You make it easier to remember why I'm fighting."

She lay down and pulled a blanket over herself.

Al sat there for a while longer, processing. Then he lay down on his bedroll, staring at the ceiling.

Sleep came slowly.

He woke to movement.

Not loud. Not threatening. Just someone shifting position in the dark.

Al opened his eyes to find Elowen sitting near the fireplace—no fire lit, just the stones still radiating faint warmth from earlier. She had a cup of water and was staring into space, the way people do when their thoughts are elsewhere.

"Can't sleep?" Al asked quietly.

She startled slightly, then relaxed when she recognized his voice. "No. You?"

"Not anymore." He sat up carefully, trying not to wake the others. "Mind if I join you?"

"Please."

He moved to the fireplace, sitting across from her with enough distance to be respectful. The darkness made it easier somehow. Less pressure. Less formality.

"What's keeping you awake?" he asked.

Elowen was quiet for a moment. "Thinking about choices. And consequences. And whether we'll regret this."

"This?"

"Standing against the Archive. Refusing the easy path." She looked at him. "We've made ourselves targets. All of us. For your sake. And I keep wondering if that was smart or just... stubborn."

"Regret it?"

"No." She said it firmly. "But I wonder if I should."

Al understood that. "I think about it too. Whether I should have just accepted the marriage bonds. Gone along with it. Made everyone's life easier."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because once you accept one cage, the next one comes easier. And the one after that. Until you forget what freedom felt like."

Elowen smiled faintly. "My mother says something similar. 'The first compromise costs the most. Every one after is cheaper.'"

"Smart woman."

"Ruthless woman," Elowen corrected. "But yes. Smart." She sipped her water. "She'd tell me I'm being foolish. That I should have distanced myself from you. Protected House Pryce's interests."

"But?"

"But I don't want to be the kind of person who trades people for stability." Elowen set down her cup. "Even if it costs me. Even if it costs my House."

They sat in silence for a while. The waystation creaked. Outside, night sounds continued—wind, distant animals, the whisper of branches.

"Can I tell you something?" Elowen asked.

"Yeah."

"I was angry when the marriage decree came down. Furious. Not at you—at the situation. At being used as a political tool. At having my future decided without my input." She looked at the darkened fireplace. "But then I met you. And you were just... a person. Confused. Tired. Trying to survive. Not a prize. Not a tool. Just someone caught in the same trap I was."

She glanced at him.

"It made me realize I wasn't angry at you. I was angry at the system that did this to both of us."

"And now?"

"Now I'm still angry. But at least I know where to aim it."

Al smiled despite himself. "That's progress."

"Is it?"

"It's more than I had when I got here."

They fell into comfortable quiet again. This time, it felt less like strangers sharing space and more like two people who had found unexpected common ground.

Eventually, Elowen stood. "I should try to sleep again. Morning will come whether I'm ready or not."

"Yeah."

She paused before returning to her bedroll. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being human. It's easier to stand with you when I remember you're not just a problem to solve."

She moved away quietly.

Al remained by the fireplace for a while longer, thinking about cages, compromises, and the cost of refusing both.

Eventually, exhaustion won. He returned to his bedroll and drifted into uneasy sleep.

The second day passed in careful routine: watch rotations, quiet conversation, and shared meals prepared from their dwindling supplies.

And proximity. Constant, unavoidable proximity.

There was nowhere to go, no space to retreat to. Every conversation was within earshot. Every movement was noticed. Privacy became a courtesy, not a reality.

It should have been unbearable. Instead, something shifted.

Small things: Rhyosyn explaining magical theory while helping Al understand System notifications; Rowena teaching him to read tracks in the dirt outside the waystation; Catrin and Elowen discussing House politics with him included, not as an outsider but as someone whose opinion mattered.

And at night, the watches.

Always two at a time. Never alone. The darkness made conversation easier, the shared vigilance creating a different kind of intimacy.

On the third night, Al found himself on watch with Rhyosyn.

She was quiet at first, scanning the forest with the same methodical attention he'd learned from Catrin. But after the first hour, she spoke.

"You know what's strange?"

"What?"

"This almost feels normal now. The five of us. The watches. The danger." She glanced at him. "Like we've been doing this for years instead of days."

"Combat tempo," Al said. "Forces you to adapt quickly."

"Is that what this is? Combat?"

"Not the shooting kind. But yeah. Same pressure. Same need to trust the people beside you."

Rhyosyn nodded slowly. "I've been in magical academies, court functions, and political gatherings. But I've never felt like part of a unit before, like my survival depended on the people next to me, and theirs on me."

"How does it feel?"

"Terrifying." She smiled. "And oddly... right."

They walked the perimeter in silence. The fishing line was still intact. No disturbances. Just the quiet night and the weight of waiting.

As they approached the southern approach, Rhyosyn stumbled slightly on uneven ground. Al reached out instinctively, catching her elbow to steady her.

The contact lasted maybe two seconds, maybe less—just long enough to ensure she had her balance.

But neither of them moved immediately after.

"Thanks," Rhyosyn said quietly.

"No problem."

They continued walking. But something had shifted. Not dramatic. Not obvious. Just... present.

When they returned to the waystation, Al noticed Catrin was awake, sitting by the window, watching the dark. She looked at him, then at Rhyosyn, her expression unreadable.

Then she nodded once and returned her attention to the window.

On the fourth night, the rotation paired Al with Rowena.

She was the quietest of the group—spoke less, observed more. Al had learned she preferred showing over telling, actions over words.

They set the watch in silence, checked the fishing line, and scanned the tree line.

An hour passed before Rowena spoke.

"You're adapting well."

Al glanced at her. "To what?"

"This. All of it. Most people from outside the realm would have broken by now. Too different. Too much pressure." She studied him. "You just... adjust."

"Marines train for that. Adapt. Overcome. Survive."

"Is that what you're doing? Surviving?"

"What else would I be doing?"

"Living," Rowena said. "There's a difference."

Al considered that. "Maybe. Hard to tell in the middle of it."

"Fair." She resumed scanning the forest. "For what it's worth, I think you're doing more than surviving. You're making choices. Taking stands. That's living. Even if it doesn't feel like it."

They walked the perimeter again. This time, when they reached the steep western drop, Rowena stopped.

"Look," she said, pointing.

Al followed her gesture. Below, in the valley, lights flickered. A town. Maybe a village. Too distant to see clearly, but the warm glow was unmistakable.

"People down there living normal lives," Rowena said. "Going to bed. Waking up. Doing their jobs. No prophecies. No Archive. No one telling them they're required."

"You envy them?"

"Sometimes." She looked at him. "Don't you?"

"Every day."

They stood there for a long moment, watching the distant lights.

Then Rowena turned away. "Come on. We should finish the circuit."

As they walked back, her shoulder brushed his—just briefly. An accident of proximity in the dark.

Neither of them acknowledged it.

But neither of them moved further apart, either.

The fifth day brought rain. Cold and steady, turning the ground to mud and the forest to gray mist. The waystation leaked in three places. They set out pots to catch the water and tried to stay warm.

Forced even closer by the weather. No outdoor watches—too dangerous, too little visibility. Just window rotations and the constant drum of rain on the roof.

By evening, they were all restless. Cabin fever was setting in.

"Story time," Elowen announced.

"What?" Catrin looked up from sharpening her sword.

"Stories. Tales. Something to pass the time." Elowen gestured around the cramped space. "We're going to drive each other insane if we just sit here in silence."

"I don't know any stories," Rowena said.

"Then tell us about your House. Your family. Anything." Elowen looked at Al. "You start."

"Me?"

"You're from another world. You've got to have stories none of us have heard."

Al thought about that. "What do you want to hear?"

"Something happy," Rhyosyn said. "Something that doesn't involve fighting, prophecies, or politics."

So Al told them about baseball. About summer afternoons and hot dogs and the satisfying crack of a bat hitting a ball just right. He described stadiums packed with people, the collective roar when someone scored, and the unusual ritual of singing during the seventh inning.

They listened with rapt attention, asking questions and laughing at the absurdity of rules that made no sense in their context.

Then Catrin shared a story about her grandmother, a legendary swordswoman and an equally legendary troublemaker. She recounted the

time her grandmother had challenged three rival House champions to simultaneous duels and won all three while drunk.

Elowen told tales of merchant caravans and the strange things people traded in the outer provinces—including one man who had insisted on paying in live chickens because he didn't trust coin.

Rhyosyn described magical experiments gone hilariously wrong, including the time she had accidentally turned her dormitory room pink for six weeks.

Even Rowena contributed, sharing her experience of tracking a rare creature through winter mountains, only to discover it was just a very large, very grumpy dog that had gotten lost.

The stories weren't grand. Weren't epic. Just people sharing small pieces of themselves in the relative safety of temporary shelter.

And somehow, that mattered more than grand gestures ever could.

On the sixth night, the rain stopped. The watches resumed outside.

Al found himself paired with Catrin again. Full circle.

They walked the now-familiar perimeter, checking the fishing line by touch as much as by sight. The ground was soft from rain. The air smelled clean and cold.

"We can't stay here much longer," Catrin said.

"I know."

"The Archive will escalate. More pressure. Better arguments. Eventually, they'll just send soldiers."

"I know," Al repeated.

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know." Al stopped walking. "Every option seems bad. Stay here, we're trapped. Move, we're exposed. Surrender to Archive custody, we're caged. Keep fighting, we're targets."

"So we choose the least bad option," Catrin said. "And we do it together."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why together?" Al looked at her. "You could cut ties. Distance yourself. Protect your House. All of you could."

Catrin was quiet for a long moment. Then she stepped closer. Not intimate. Not threatening. Just... present.

"Because we're not leaving you alone in this. Not anymore." Her voice was firm. "You're ours. Whether the Archive likes it or not. Whether the

marriage bonds are legal or not. You're with us. And we're with you."

She reached out and touched his arm briefly. "That's not politics. That's choice."

Her hand fell away, but the warmth of the contact lingered.

They finished the watch in silence. But it was a different kind of silence. Not uncomfortable. Not distant.

Connected.

When they returned to the waystation, the others were awake, waiting. No one spoke. But something had shifted in the group dynamics. Something Al couldn't name but could feel.

They weren't strangers anymore.

They weren't just allies.

They were becoming something else. Something that didn't yet have a name.

But it was real.

And in the cold night, surrounded by unseen threats and unpredictable futures, that reality mattered more than anything.

Al lay down that night and, for the first time since arriving in this world, felt as if he wasn't alone.

The feeling was terrifying.

And somehow, against all logic, it felt like hope.

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Chapter Sixty-Three

CHAPTER 63

The seventh night at the waystation brought rain again.

Not the heavy downpour from before, just a steady, quiet drumming on the roof that turned the world outside into gray mist. The kind of weather that made you want to stay inside, stay close, stay warm.

Al stood watch at the window while the others slept. His shift. Two hours of silence and vigilance while rain streaked the glass and the forest disappeared into darkness.

He'd learned to appreciate these quiet hours—time to think without the constant pressure of eyes on him. Time to process everything that had happened since Keeper Morrigan's visit.

Required, not chosen.

The words still sat heavy in his chest.

A soft sound behind him. Footsteps, careful but not sneaking.

Al glanced back to find Catrin emerging from the sleeping area, wrapped in a blanket against the cold. She moved to the fireplace and added wood with practiced quiet, coaxing the embers back to life.

"Couldn't sleep?" Al asked quietly.

"Too much thinking." She settled near the growing flames, patting the floor beside her. "Join me? You've been standing for an hour."

Al checked the window one more time—nothing moving in the rain—then crossed to sit beside her. Not close, but at a respectful distance. The way they'd been careful to maintain since that first night watch together.

But Catrin shifted slightly, closing some of that distance. Still not touching. Just... closer.

"What are you thinking about?" Al asked.

"Everything. Nothing. The Archive. The prophecies. What happens when we can't hide here anymore." She pulled the blanket tighter. "You?"

"Same. Plus trying to figure out what 'required' actually means in practical terms." He stared at the fire. "And trying to understand how I can be a seventh son when I don't even know if I have brothers."

Catrin looked at him sharply. "What?"

"My mom never told me who my father was. For all I know, I'm an only child. But the System knows. The prophecies know. Keeper Morrigan was certain." Al's jaw tightened. "So either there are six guys out there who share my blood and I've never met them, or the System knows something about my family that I don't. Either way, it's unsettling."

"You've never tried to find out?"

"My mom made it clear the subject was closed, and I respected that. She raised me alone, worked two jobs, never complained. If she didn't want to talk about my father, I figured she had her reasons." He paused. "But now? Now those reasons might matter in ways neither of us expected."

Catrin was quiet for a moment. "The System doesn't make mistakes about lineage. If it says you're a seventh son, you are. Which means somewhere, there are six other men with your father's blood."

"Men I've never met. Who probably don't know I exist. Who have no idea they're part of some prophecy chain." Al shook his head. "I keep waiting for someone to explain the job description. 'Congratulations, you're a seventh son. Here's your assigned tasks. Good luck.'"

Catrin smiled faintly. "I don't think it works that way."

"Apparently not." Al shifted his weight. "How are you holding up? Really?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Honestly? I'm terrified. Not of the Archive or the prophecies or even the political fallout. I'm terrified that we're going to fail. That all of this—standing up to the Archive, refusing the easy path, trying to do the right thing—is going to collapse and we'll end up worse off than if we'd just accepted the cages."

"You don't believe that."

"No. But I'm still terrified it might be true." She looked at him. "Does that make sense?"

"Yeah. It does."

They fell quiet, watching the fire. Outside, the rain continued its steady rhythm.

"Can I ask you something?" Catrin said finally.

"Always."

"Do you regret it? Any of it? Being thrown into this world, into our problems, into all of this chaos?"

Al thought about that. Really thought about it.

"Parts of it," he said honestly. "I regret not being able to say goodbye to my mom. I regret losing my old life without choosing to. I regret being trapped in a situation I don't fully understand with stakes I can't control."

He paused.

"But I don't regret meeting you. Any of you. I don't regret having people around me who care whether I live or die for reasons beyond what I can provide them. That's... that's something I didn't have before. Not really."

Catrin turned to look at him fully. The firelight caught her face, highlighting features Al had memorized over days of forced proximity. Strong jaw. Sharp eyes. The kind of face that would've been called handsome on a man, striking on a woman.

"You had people who cared," she said.

"I had fellow Marines. Brothers in arms. People who'd die for me in combat because that's the code." Al met her eyes. "But outside of that? I was just another guy. Replaceable. Forgettable. Here, I'm... needed. It's not better. But it's different."

"You're not just needed to me," Catrin said quietly. "You're—"

She stopped. Caught herself.

The air between them shifted. Something unspoken hung there.

Al felt his heart rate pick up. "I'm what?"

Catrin didn't answer immediately. She was looking at him with an expression he'd seen hints of before but never this direct. Not calculation. Not political maneuvering. Just... want.

"You're someone I chose," she said finally. "Not because the Crown decreed it. Not because prophecy required it. Because I wanted to."

The distance between them had closed without Al noticing. Inches now. Close enough that he could feel the warmth radiating from her skin. Could see the slight rise and fall of her breathing.

"Catrin—"

"I know," she interrupted. "I know all the reasons this is complicated. The politics. The pressure. The fact that we barely know each other outside of crisis situations." Her voice dropped lower. "But I also know that every night when I take watch with you, I don't want it to end. And every morning when we wake up still alive, the first thing I think is that I'm glad you're still here."

Al's breath caught. "I think about you too."

It came out rougher than he intended. More honest.

Catrin's hand moved, resting on the floor between them. Not reaching for him. Just... there. Close.

Al looked at it. At her. At the small space that separated them.

He'd been in combat. Faced death. Made split-second decisions that meant survival or failure.

This felt harder.

Because this mattered in a different way. This was choosing something for himself instead of just reacting to threats. This was admitting that somewhere between the forced marriage decree, the shared watches, and the quiet conversations, something real had started to grow.

He moved his hand. Covered hers.

Catrin's fingers curled, holding on.

They sat there, hands clasped, fire crackling, rain drumming overhead. Not speaking. Just... present.

Then Catrin shifted closer. Her free hand came up, touching his face. Gentle. Questioning.

Al leaned into the touch.

"Is this okay?" she whispered.

"Yeah," he breathed.

She moved closer still. Their faces inches apart now. Al could see every detail—the small scar above her left eyebrow, the gold flecks in her brown eyes, the way her lips parted slightly as she breathed.

"Al—"

The fishing line rattled.

Sharp. Distinct. The warning they'd set up.

Something was moving outside.

They froze.

Catrin's hand dropped from his face. Al's fingers tightened on hers briefly before releasing.

"How many?" she whispered.

Al moved to the window, scanning the tree line. Rain made it hard to see, but movement caught his eye. Figures. Multiple. Moving with purpose through the forest.

"At least six. Maybe more. Coming from the south approach."

Catrin was already moving, waking the others with quiet efficiency. Rhyosyn first, then Elowen, then Rowena. Within seconds, everyone was armed and alert.

Al summoned both pistols, checking the loads by feel in the dark.

The System notification appeared, quiet and procedural:

[**COMBAT IMMINENT]**

Threat Assessment: Multiple Hostiles

Recommended Action: Defensive Positioning

"They found us," Elowen said, buckling on her sword belt.

"Looks like it." Al moved to the door. "Rhyosyn, can you tell what they are?"

She closed her eyes briefly, reaching out with whatever magical sense she had. "Human. Armed. Professional. Not Archive—wrong magical signature. Not House soldiers either."

"Then who?" Rowena asked, crossbow ready.

"Does it matter?" Catrin drew her sword. "They're here. We deal with them."

The figures were closer now, moving in formation, encircling the waystation with tactical precision.

Al felt something cold settle in his chest. "This is a capture attempt. Not an assassination."

"How can you tell?"

"The formation. They're boxing us in, not just attacking. They want someone alive." He looked at the others. "Probably me."

"Definitely you," Rhyosyn confirmed. "But they'll go through us to get to you."

The first arrow hit the door. Not breaking through—just a message. We know you're in there.

Then a voice. Female. Authoritative. Amplified somehow so it carried over the rain.

"Corporal Aleric Tanim. You are summoned by order of the Crown. Surrender peacefully, and no harm will come to your companions. Resist, and they will be considered accomplices to the defiance of royal decree."

Catrin's jaw tightened. "Royal decree. The Archive got their escalation approved."

"Or someone else did," Al said. He raised his voice. "On whose authority?"

A pause. Then: "Queen Thorne of the Barber Coast. You are wanted for questioning regarding matters of state security. Surrender within five minutes, or we will enter by force."

Al and Catrin exchanged looks.

"Queen Thorne," Catrin breathed. "The one whose soldiers you saved."

"The one whose enemy you've been fighting," Rhyosyn added. "The feud. The attacks. All of it."

"She's not with the Triumvirate," Elowen said. "She's been maneuvering against them for years."

Al felt the pieces clicking together. "So saving her soldiers gave her a claim. And now she's using it."

"If she takes you, you'll disappear into her territory," Catrin said. "The Triumvirate won't be able to touch you. But neither will we."

The voice outside continued. "Four minutes, Corporal."

Al looked at the others. Five people against at least six trained soldiers. In the rain. In the dark. While surrounded.

Bad odds.

But he'd worked with worse.

"We're not surrendering," he said.

"Agreed," Catrin replied immediately.

"Then we fight our way out," Rowena said, moving to a window position.

"No." Al was thinking fast. "We can't win a straight fight. But we can make them work for it. Make it costly enough that they reconsider."

"How?"

"I create an opening. You run. Get to the horses. Don't stop until you're clear."

Catrin grabbed his arm. "We're not leaving you."

"You have to. If they take me, at least you're free to work on getting me back. If they take all of us, it's over."

"Al—"

"Three minutes."

He looked at her. Really looked at her. At the woman he'd almost kissed five minutes ago. At the person who'd chosen him not because she had to, but because she wanted to.

"I'll find my way back," he said quietly. "I promise."

Catrin's eyes were bright. Angry. Terrified. "You better."

She released his arm.

Al turned to the others. "On my signal, you run for the back window. I'll hold the door. Rhyosyn, can you provide cover? Smoke, fog, anything?"

"I can manage a mist. Won't last long."

"Long enough." Al checked his pistols one more time. "Ready?"

They nodded.

"Two minutes, Corporal."

Al moved to the door. Catrin positioned herself at the back window with the others.

"Now," Al said.

He kicked the door open and started firing.

The soldiers scattered, diving for cover. Al advanced, forcing them back and giving the others time.

Behind him, he heard glass break. Rhyosyn's mist rolled out, thick and concealing.

Then came the sound of horses—running, getting away.

Relief flooded through him even as return fire forced him back into the doorway.

He'd bought them maybe thirty seconds. Not enough to escape far, but enough to get clear.

The System chimed softly:

[EXPERIENCE GAINED]

Combat Action: Cover Fire - Successful

Tactical Decision: Sacrifice Play - Acknowledged

Team Survival: Priority Maintained

XP +450

Total XP: 9,847 / 10,000

Al smiled grimly. Almost there.

A figure emerged from the rain—tall, armored, moving with absolute confidence.

"Cease fire," she commanded. The soldiers obeyed instantly.

She stopped ten feet from Al, studying him with cold assessment.

"Corporal Tanim. Your companions have fled. You are alone. I suggest you reconsider your position."

Al kept his pistols trained on her. "And I suggest you reconsider yours. You're working for a queen who's going to start a war if she tries to claim me."

"Perhaps. But that is not your concern." She gestured, and soldiers moved to flank her. "You will come with us, peacefully or otherwise. The queen has questions only you can answer."

"About what?"

"About why you're worth more than you should be. About why prophecies move when you're near. About what you really are." Her expression didn't change. "And about why killing you would solve so many problems yet remains impossible."

Al's finger tightened on the trigger, but he was surrounded, outgunned, and out of options.

And the others had gotten away. That had to count for something.

He lowered his weapons slowly.

"Smart choice," the commander said.

They moved quickly after that—binding his hands, confiscating his pistols, and loading him onto a horse with professional efficiency.

As they rode away from the waystation, Al caught one last glimpse through the rain.

Empty. The others were gone. Safe.

And somewhere in the forest, Catrin was probably already planning a rescue that would likely get her killed.

The thought should have worried him.

Instead, it felt like hope.

Because she'd chosen him. And he'd chosen her back. And whatever happened next, that mattered.

Even if they never got to finish what they'd started.

Even if that almost-kiss remained almost forever.

It still mattered.

The System notification pulsed quietly:

[STATUS UPDATE]

Condition: Captured

Location: Unknown (Moving)

Party Status: Separated

Quest Update: Survive

Recommended Action: Observe. Adapt. Endure.

Al closed his eyes and let the rain wash over him.

One way or another, he'd find his way back.

He'd made a promise.

And Marines kept their promises.

Even the ones made in firelight, with rain on the roof and almost-kisses hanging in the air like unfinished sentences.

Especially those.

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Chapter Sixty-Four

CHAPTER 64

They kept Al in a stone room with no windows.

Not a cell. Not technically. There were no bars, no chains. Just a heavy door with guards outside and wards etched into the walls that hummed faintly whenever he got too close.

Queen Thorne's hospitality.

He'd been here three days. Three days of isolation broken only by meal deliveries and brief interrogations that went nowhere because Al had learned the first rule of captivity: answer questions with questions, give nothing useful, and buy time.

The Queen wanted to know what he was. Why prophecies moved around him. Why the Triumvirate wanted him. Why the Archive considered him necessary.

Al wanted to know if Catrin and the others had made it out.

Neither party was getting answers.

On the third night, Al sat against the far wall, knees drawn up, trying not to think about the almost-kiss. Trying not to wonder if he'd ever get the chance to finish what they had started.

Trying not to feel the weight of isolation pressing down like a physical thing.

That's when the System chimed.

Not the usual soft notification. This was different. Louder. More insistent. The kind of alert that demanded attention.

[EXPERIENCE THRESHOLD REACHED]

The text appeared in his vision, glowing brighter than normal.

[LEVEL UP AVAILABLE]

Current Level: 3

Accumulated XP: 15,247 / 15,000

Excess XP: 247

Progress to Level 5: 247 / 20,000

Al sat up straighter. Level 4. Finally.

He'd been close for days. The capture had pushed him over—combat XP, tactical decision-making, and protecting his team. The System had logged it all.

And now it was offering him the choice.

[INITIATE LEVEL ADVANCEMENT?]

Warning: Level advancement requires conscious allocation of resources.

Recommended: Safe environment, minimal distraction.

Current Status: Suboptimal

Al almost laughed. Suboptimal. That was one way to put it.

But he wasn't going to wait. Not here. Not in Queen Thorne's custody, where anything could happen.

He focused on the prompt and mentally confirmed.

Yes.

The world shifted.

Not physically. The room remained the same. But something fundamental changed in how Al perceived it. Like a frequency he'd been half-aware of suddenly came into full focus.

The wards on the walls stopped being just faint hums. He could see them now—threads of energy woven into the stone, pulsing with structured intent. Not just barriers. Commands. Rules written into reality itself.

His body felt different too. Lighter. More responsive. Like someone had removed limiters he didn't know were there.

[LEVEL INCREASED]

New Level: 4

Attribute Points Awarded: 12

Summoning Capacity Increased: 300 cu in → 600 cu in

[STATUS UPDATE REQUIRED]

You have unallocated attribute points.

Please assign before continuing.

The familiar status screen materialized:

Name: Aleric Tanim

Origin: United States of America

Blessing: American Magic

Affiliation: House Tanim

Level: 4

Attributes:

- Strength: 13
- Constitution: 13
- Dexterity: 12
- Agility: 13
- Mind: 18
- Wisdom: 14
- Charisma: 12
- Luck: 16

Unassigned Attribute Pool: 12

Summoning Capacity: 600 cubic inches

Al stared at the numbers. Twelve points. More than he'd ever had at once.

And for the first time, the choice felt like it mattered beyond just survival.

He thought about the combat he'd experienced, the close calls, and the moments where being faster would have meant less pain. Where being stronger would have ended fights more swiftly.

He could min-max. Dump everything into combat stats. Become a more effective weapon.

The System was probably expecting that. Hell, it might even recommend it.

But Al thought about something else.

He recalled Keeper Morrigan's words: "You're not special. You're functional."

He thought about the Archive wanting to lock him up, about Queen Thorne treating him like a resource to be controlled, and how every power structure in this world saw him as a tool.

And he thought about Catrin, sitting by the fire, saying, "You're someone I chose."

Not because of what he could do, but because of who he was.

Al took a breath and started allocating.

Constitution: 13 → 16 (+3 points)

Durability. Endurance. The ability to take hits and keep going. If he was going to survive captivity, interrogations, and whatever came next—he needed to remain unbroken.

Mind: 18 → 22 (+4 points)

His strongest stat. The one that governed American Magic, summoning efficiency, and tactical thinking. The thing that made him dangerous wasn't

his strength—it was his ability to adapt, plan, and improvise. He needed to push it higher.

Wisdom: 14 → 19 (+5 points)

Perception. Judgment. Understanding. He needed to see through lies, recognize traps, and make sound decisions under pressure. Being smart wasn't enough if he kept missing the bigger picture.

He looked at Luck: 16. To raise it even once would cost 17 points—more than he had. The System's scaling made high Luck incredibly expensive. He'd have to save those points for later levels.

He confirmed the allocation.

The change was immediate and disorienting.

His body felt denser somehow, more solid—like his bones had been reinforced with something stronger than calcium. The constant ache from three days on stone floors faded to background noise.

His thoughts sharpened. The wards on the walls became even clearer—he could now see the weak points, the places where the energy threads overlapped inefficiently. He could probably disrupt them if he had the right tools.

And something else—a sense of... possibility. Like the world held more options than it showed. More paths through situations than the obvious ones.

The System chimed again.

[LEVEL ADVANCEMENT COMPLETE]

New Status:

- Level: 4
- Summoning Capacity: 600 cubic inches
- Attributes Updated
- Oversight Level: ELEVATED

[NOTICE]

Your progression has been flagged for review.

Reason: Unconventional allocation pattern detected.

Standard combat optimization: Not followed.

Analysis: Subject prioritizes adaptability over specialization.

Assessment: Non-standard but viable.

Note: Foreign Integration classification carries increased XP requirements.

Current progression rate: 65% slower than native equivalent.

Recommendation: Monitor for strategic implications.

Al stared at that note. 65% slower.

He'd just hit Level 4 at 15,000 XP. A native with the same experience would be... what? Level 8? Level 10? Maybe higher?

The System was penalizing him for being foreign, making him work harder for every level, every attribute point, every capacity increase.

Catrin and the others probably thought Level 4 was impressive. To them, it probably was—most people took years to reach it.

But they didn't know. They didn't understand that by their standards, with his combat experience and XP accumulation, he should be twice as strong. That every level he gained came at nearly double the cost.

The System wasn't just neutral; it was biased, structured to favor natives and to make foreign integration deliberately harder.

And nobody had told him.

Al dismissed the notification with more force than necessary. The System could monitor all it wanted; he wasn't going to turn himself into a one-trick combat specialist just because that was what the world expected.

He'd survived this long by being adaptable, by thinking instead of just fighting, by understanding that sometimes the answer wasn't more firepower—it was better timing.

And now, with 490 cubic inches of capacity...

Al focused on that number. Almost 500. That was serious carrying capacity. He could summon heavier weapons now, more gear, and actual tactical options instead of just making do with pistols and improvisation.

He tested it carefully, reaching for the summoning sense. He started with what he knew.

His M9 pistol—the full-size service weapon that had been too large before.

It appeared instantly. Familiar weight. 15-round capacity. The weapon he'd trained with for years.

He dismissed it and kept testing, methodically working through what the capacity would actually allow.

M4 carbine? Still too complex. Too many parts. The System rejected it.

But standalone weapons platforms? Those worked.

M203 grenade launcher. The standalone version, not attached to a rifle. That materialized cleanly. Heavy. Sturdy. Break-action simplicity.

M320 grenade launcher—the newer standalone platform. Also worked.

Al paused, recalculating. If he could summon standalone launcher systems...

M26 MASS shotgun. The modular accessory shotgun system. It appeared in his hands—compact, brutal, designed for breaching and close quarters.

He dismissed it and tried something heavier.

M72 LAW. Light anti-armor weapon. Disposable rocket launcher.

The tube materialized. Extended configuration, ready to fire. About 35 inches long, maybe 5 pounds. Well within his capacity limits.

Al felt his heart rate pick up. He dismissed it and tried the next one.

M141 BDM. Bunker Defeat Munition. Heavier than the LAW. More powerful.

It appeared. Solid. Real. The kind of weapon that changed building-clearing operations from "breach and clear" to "remove the building."

He could summon anti-armor weapons now—portable rockets, one-shot disposables that could take out vehicles or fortified positions.

He kept testing.

MP5 submachine gun. Too complex in full configuration. But folded? Collapsed stock, compact profile?

It worked. Not his preferred weapon, but if he needed something concealable with serious firepower, it was an option.

Grenades were easy. Fragmentation, flashbang, smoke, thermite—all of them fit comfortably within his capacity. He could carry dozens if he needed to.

Claymore mines. M18A1. Each one about 8.5 inches wide, 3.5 pounds. He tested summoning one, then two, then four.

All of them appeared without straining his capacity. Directional anti-personnel mines with "front toward enemy" stamped on the face.

Breaching charges. Frame charges for doors. Strip charges for hinges. Det cord. C4 blocks with time-delay fuses.

All of it was accessible now. All of it fell within the 500 cubic inch threshold.

Al sat back against the wall, processing.

This wasn't a magic armory. He couldn't summon tanks or machine gun nests or infinite ammunition. The System still had limits, still enforced realistic constraints.

But within those constraints?

He was man-portable. Doctrine-compliant. And absolutely lethal.

He could walk into a combat situation with:

A sidearm with spare magazines

A standalone grenade launcher with mixed ordnance

An M72 LAW for anti-armor

Fragmentation and smoke grenades

Claymore mines for area denial

Breaching charges

All summoned on demand

No backpack. No loadout weight. No logistics train. Just the intent to retrieve, and the weapons appeared.

That was the real advantage. Not unlimited firepower—but unlimited flexibility.

He could adapt to situations in real-time. Could summon what he needed when he needed it. Could carry anti-armor, anti-personnel, breaching, and suppression capability all at once without the physical burden.

A Marine with perfect logistics support built into his nervous system.

Al tested one more thing: ammunition capacity.

40mm grenade rounds for the M203. He summoned them one at a time, counting. HE-DP. Smoke. Illumination. Buckshot.

Ten rounds barely registered. Twenty rounds still had room to spare.

Pistol magazines. He could summon a dozen 15-round mags and not feel the capacity strain.

He stopped testing and dismissed everything.

Queen Thorne thought she had a prisoner. A valuable asset to be controlled and studied.

She had a Level 4 Marine with the combat loadout flexibility of an entire fire team.

And the wards on these walls? They were designed to stop magical summons, prevent spell casting, and block enchantments.

They weren't designed to stop a bunker-defeat munition fired at close range from inside the room.

Al wasn't going to do that—not yet, not without knowing where he was or how to reach his people. Breaking out just to get lost in enemy territory would be foolish.

But when the time came? When Catrin and the others made their rescue attempt and he needed to create an exit?

He had options now. Real options. The kind backed by U.S. military doctrine and enough explosive force to make structural engineers nervous.

490 cubic inches.

It sounded like such an arbitrary number.

But translated into modern military hardware, it meant Al wasn't just dangerous.

He was a walking force multiplier.

And Queen Thorne had no idea.

Al leaned back against the wall, processing.

Three days ago, he'd been at a waystation with people who had chosen to stand with him—people he had started to care about beyond just political necessity.

Now he was alone, captured, isolated.

But he was also Level 4: stronger, smarter, more capable than he had ever been.

And somehow, that made the isolation worse.

Because he could feel the potential now. The things he could do with this much power, the fights he could win, the problems he could solve.

But none of it mattered if he was locked in a room with no one to protect and no way to reach the people he cared about.

The door opened.

Al looked up to find Queen Thorne herself standing in the doorway—tall, regal, wearing armor that looked ceremonial but moved like it was designed for combat.

She studied him with cold assessment.

"You leveled up," she said—not a question.

Al said nothing.

"I felt the ward shift when you did. The magical resonance changed." She stepped into the room, and the guards closed the door behind her. "Level 4. Impressive. Most people take years to reach that threshold."

"I've had motivation," Al said flatly.

Queen Thorne smiled without warmth. "Indeed. Three days of isolation, and you spend it growing stronger. That tells me something about you, Corporal Tanim."

"What does it tell you?"

"That you're not defeated by captivity. That you use pressure to progress instead of breaking under it." She moved closer—still out of arm's reach but

close enough to be intentionally imposing. "That makes you valuable. Or dangerous. I haven't decided which yet."

"Why am I here?" Al asked. "What do you actually want?"

"Information. Leverage. Understanding." Queen Thorne settled onto a bench against the wall, perfectly composed. "The Triumvirate controls the mainland through careful balance. Three powers, none strong enough to dominate alone, all invested in maintaining the status quo."

"And you're outside that system."

"I am the opposition—the reminder that their authority ends at my borders." Her eyes were sharp. "But recently, that balance has shifted. Prophecies are moving. The Archive is escalating. The Houses are maneuvering. All because of you."

"I didn't ask for that."

"No. But you've become the fulcrum anyway." She leaned forward slightly. "Tell me, Corporal. Do you understand what you are?"

"A foreign soldier who got unlucky."

"No. You're a seventh son in a world where that designation has been statistically impossible for three generations. You're a man who breaks covenant magic simply by existing outside its definitions. You're carrying dragon lineage that shouldn't be possible to carry."

Al kept his expression neutral. "The Archive told you all this?"

"The Archive and I have... complicated arrangements. They want to contain you. I want to understand you." Queen Thorne stood. "So I'll make you an offer—one I suspect you'll refuse, but I'll make it anyway."

"I'm listening."

"Work for me. Not as property, but as an ally. I can protect you from the Archive's cages. I can give you resources, territory, and autonomy. In exchange, you help me tip the balance. Break the Triumvirate's stranglehold. Create space for something new."

Al studied her, looking for deception and finding only cold calculation.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you remain here until I determine what else to do with you. I won't harm you—you're too valuable. But I won't release you either. You're a strategic asset, Corporal, whether you accept that or not."

There it was. The choice the outline had promised.

Trade autonomy for safety. Accept protection in exchange for servitude. Become a tool for a different master.

Or refuse and accept vulnerability. Stay locked up. Give up power in favor of principle.

Three days ago, Al might have taken the deal. He might have rationalized it as practical, as the smart play.

But three days ago, he wasn't Level 4.

Three days ago, he hadn't felt what real power meant.

And now he understood something fundamental: giving up autonomy meant giving up the ability to choose. And once you made that trade, you couldn't take it back.

Queen Thorne was offering safety, protection, and resources.

But Catrin had offered choice, trust, and the freedom to be human instead of functional.

Al met the Queen's eyes.

"No."

Queen Thorne's expression didn't change. "You're certain?"

"Yeah. I'm not trading one cage for another, even if yours is nicer."

"You understand this means you remain my prisoner."

"I understand." Al leaned back against the wall. "But I'd rather be a prisoner who chose to refuse than a free man who gave up the right to choose."

Silence stretched between them.

Then Queen Thorn nodded slowly. "Interesting. Most people choose safety when offered it. You choose principle."

"Is that a problem?"

"Not for me. For you, perhaps." She moved to the door, then paused. "You realize your fiancées are planning a rescue attempt."

Al's heart jumped. "Are they—"

"Safe. For now. But attempting to infiltrate my territory to retrieve you will fail, obviously. My borders are better protected than the Triumvirate's."

She looked back at him.

"You could prevent that. Accept my offer, and I'll send word that you're here willingly. No rescue necessary. No one gets hurt trying to reach you."

Al felt the trap close around him. Not physical, but emotional.

She wasn't threatening him; she was threatening the people he cared about, making their safety contingent on his compliance.

It was smart, ruthless, and effective.

And Al knew that if he gave in now, it would never stop. There would always be another threat, another reason to comply, another cage justified by protecting someone else.

"Tell them I'm alive," Al said quietly. "Tell them I refused. Tell them—"

He stopped, thought about Catrin by the fire, about the almost-kiss interrupted by soldiers, about promises made and not yet kept.

"Tell them I'll find my way back, and I'm keeping my promises."

Queen Thorne studied him for a long moment.

"You're either very brave or very stupid, Corporal Tanim."

"Both, probably."

She almost smiled. "Perhaps that's why prophecies shift around you. You refuse to behave rationally."

She opened the door.

"You'll remain here until I determine your value. But I'll deliver your message. It won't stop them from coming, but at least they'll know you chose this."

She left. The door closed. The lock engaged.

Al was alone again.

But somehow, it felt different. Because he'd made a choice. Not the smart choice. Not the safe choice. But his choice.

And for the first time since being captured, he felt like himself.

The System chimed softly.

[CONSEQUENCE LOGGED]

Decision Recorded: Autonomy over safety

Trait Assessment: Principles maintained under pressure

Classification: Non-standard survival pattern

Status Effect Acquired: UNBROKEN

- Resistance to coercion: Increased
- Mental fortitude: Enhanced
- Intimidation resistance: Improved

Note: This trait reflects behavioral patterns, not combat statistics.

Al smiled grimly. Unbroken. Yeah. That felt right.

He was Level 4. Trapped. Isolated. Vulnerable.

But unbroken.

And somewhere out there, people he cared about were planning a rescue that would probably get them killed.

Al closed his eyes and started planning. Because if they were coming for him, he needed to be ready. He needed to have a way out prepared. He needed to ensure their risk wasn't wasted.

600 cubic inches. Level 4 stats. And enough determination to fuel reckless decisions.

Time to figure out how to break out of a warded stone room.

Because Marines kept their promises.

Even the stupid ones.

Especially those.

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Chapter Sixty-Five

CHAPTER 65

The rescue came on the fifth night.

Not with soldiers or siegecraft or overwhelming force. With precision. Quiet. Professional.

Catrin picked the lock on Al's door while Rhyosyn suppressed the wards with a counter-spell she'd clearly spent days preparing. Elowen and Rowena held the hallway, dealing with guards so quietly Al didn't hear the bodies drop.

By the time they reached him, Al had already summoned his sidearm and was halfway through planning his own breakout.

"You're late," he said when Catrin appeared in the doorway.

She smiled grimly. "You're welcome."

They moved fast after that. Out of the fortress, through passages Catrin had somehow mapped, into the night where horses waited. Al didn't ask how they'd managed it. Didn't ask what it cost.

Just rode.

They put twenty miles between themselves and Queen Thorne's territory before stopping at a safe house—another waystation, this one even more remote than the last. Deep forest. No roads. The kind of place you only found if you knew exactly where to look.

Inside, they secured the door, checked the wards, and established watch rotations.

Then, finally, they stopped moving.

Al sat down heavily against the wall, exhaustion catching up all at once. Five days of captivity. Isolation. Interrogation. The weight of choosing principle over safety.

And now freedom. Temporary, fragile, but real.

Catrin sat down beside him. Not close. Not distant. Just... present.

"You refused her offer," she said. Not a question.

"Yeah."

"Queen Thorn told us. Sent a messenger before we even reached her borders. Said you'd declined her protection. That you'd chosen to remain her prisoner rather than trade autonomy for safety."

Al looked at her. "She also told you I'd sent a message."

"She did." Catrin's voice was quiet. "You said you were keeping your promises."

"I meant it."

"I know." Catrin pulled her knees up, resting her arms across them. "That's why we came. Not because we thought you needed rescuing—though you did. Because you kept your word even when breaking it would have been easier."

The others were settling in around the room. Rhyosyn by the fireplace, coaxing flames to life. Elowen checking supplies. Rowena at the window, scanning the forest.

But they were all listening. Al could tell.

"We need to talk," Catrin said. "All of us. About what this is. What we are. What we're not."

Al felt his chest tighten. "Okay."

Catrin raised her voice slightly. "Everyone. Stop pretending you're not paying attention and come here."

There was a pause. Then Rhyosyn stood, dusting ash from her hands. Elowen set down the supply pack. Rowena turned from the window.

They gathered in a loose circle. No formality. No hierarchy. Just five people who'd risked everything for each other and needed to acknowledge it.

Catrin spoke first. "The Crown decreed we marry you. Political arrangement. Breeding stock. Living treaty to balance power between Houses."

"We know," Elowen said quietly.

"But that's not what this is anymore," Catrin continued. She looked at Al. "Is it?"

Al took a breath. "No. It's not."

"Then we need to be honest about what it is," Rhyosyn said. "Because we can't keep pretending it's just politics. Not after everything."

"What do you want it to be?" Al asked.

Silence.

Then Elowen spoke. "I want it to be a choice. Not an obligation. Not a decree. A choice we all make."

"Agreed," Rowena said. "I didn't choose this at first. But I choose to be here now. That matters."

Rhyosyn nodded. "We've been operating like a unit. Watching each other's backs. Trusting each other. That's not a political arrangement. That's..."

"Partnership," Catrin finished. "Real partnership. Based on choice and trust."

Al looked at each of them. These women who'd been thrown into his life by royal decree. Who'd had every reason to resent him. Who'd chosen to stand with him anyway.

"I need to say something," he said quietly. "And I need you to hear it."

They waited.

"I care about you," Al said. "All of you. Not because the Crown said we're married. Not because prophecy requires it. Because you're good people who deserve better than being treated as political tools. And somewhere along the way, you stopped being strangers I was stuck with and became people I don't want to lose."

He paused.

"But I don't know what that means yet. I don't know if it's friendship or something more or something in between. I just know it's real. And it matters."

Catrin's expression softened. "That's enough. Knowing it's real. That's enough for now."

"Is it?" Elowen asked. "Because we're still technically married by Crown decree. Still bound by legal arrangements we didn't choose. Still operating under political pressure."

"Which is why we need to decide what we are," Rhyosyn said. "Not what they say we are. What we actually are."

Rowena spoke up, her voice careful. "I think we're people trying to survive something bigger than us. Who happen to care about each other. Who've chosen to stick together even when it would be easier not to."

"That's a partnership," Catrin said. "Maybe not a traditional one. Maybe not what anyone expected. But it's real."

"What about..." Elowen trailed off, then pushed forward. "What about the rest? The intimacy. The physical component. The expectations."

The air shifted. Everyone looked uncomfortable.

Al cleared his throat. "I'm not going to pretend I'm not attracted to you. Any of you. But attraction and trust aren't the same thing. And right now, survival matters more than figuring out... that."

"Agreed," Catrin said immediately. "We're in the middle of a crisis. The Archive wants Al contained. Queen Thorne wants him controlled. Houses are maneuvering. Prophecies are moving. This is not the time to complicate things with..."

"Sex," Rhyosyn finished bluntly. "Let's just say it. We're all thinking it. We're all adults. Sex."

"Thank you for that," Elowen said dryly.

"I'm just being honest," Rhyosyn replied. "We're attracted to him. Some of us more than others, probably. He's attracted to us. That's normal. Natural. But acting on it right now would be..."

"Stupid," Rowena said. "Tactically stupid. Emotionally stupid. Every kind of stupid."

"Exactly," Catrin agreed. "So we acknowledge it exists. We acknowledge feelings exist. But we agree to table it. Survive first. Figure out the rest later."

Al felt relief wash over him. "That works for me."

"Me too," Elowen said.

The others nodded.

"So what are we?" Rhyosyn asked. "If we're not just a political arrangement and not yet... whatever comes after. What are we right now?"

Al thought about it. About shared watches and quiet conversations. About the almost-kiss by the fire. About promises made and kept. About choosing each other when it would have been easier not to.

"We're people who chose to stand together," he said. "Who trust each other enough to be honest. Who care about each other's survival and freedom. Who aren't ready to define it further but know it's real."

"That's what we are," Catrin agreed. "Not yet lovers. Not just friends. Something in between. Something undefined."

"Something that doesn't need to be defined right now," Elowen added. "Because we have more immediate problems."

"Like staying alive," Rowena said.

"And free," Rhyosyn added.

"And together," Catrin finished.

They fell quiet. The fire crackled. Outside, the wind moved through the trees.

"I have one more thing to say," Al said. "And it's important."

They looked at him.

"If we're doing this—choosing each other, standing together—then we're equals. Not Crown property. Not political tools. Equals. Partners. No one owns anyone. No one gets to make decisions for anyone else."

"Agreed," Catrin said immediately.

"Absolutely," Elowen said.

"Yes," Rhyosyn and Rowena said together.

"Good." Al stood slowly. "Then we survive first. We protect each other. We stay free. And we figure out the rest when we're not running for our lives."

"That's the agreement?" Catrin asked.

"That's the agreement."

She stood and extended her hand. "Partnership. Equals. Survival first. Everything else later."

Al took her hand. "Deal."

The others joined in. Five hands clasped together in the firelight.

Not a marriage. Not a romance. Not a political arrangement.

Just five people choosing each other. Choosing trust. Choosing to survive together and figure out the rest when the world stopped trying to kill them.

Later, after watch rotations were established and everyone else had settled in to sleep, Al found himself on first watch with Catrin again.

They sat by the window in comfortable silence for a while. Then Catrin spoke.

"What you said. About caring about us. Did you mean it?"

"Yeah."

"All of us? Or..."

She trailed off. Al knew what she was asking. What she couldn't quite say.

"I meant all of you," he said honestly. "But I'd be lying if I said it was exactly the same with everyone."

"You feel differently about me," Catrin said. Not a question.

"Yeah."

"Because of the almost-kiss."

"Because of everything. The conversations. The honesty. The way you stood up to the Archive. The way you choose principle over convenience." Al looked at her. "You make me want to be better. That's different."

Catrin smiled faintly. "You make me remember why I became a soldier instead of a politician. That's different too."

"So what do we do about it?"

"Nothing. Right now." Catrin's expression was serious. "We agreed. Survive first. And I meant it. This situation is too complicated. Too dangerous. Too uncertain. Acting on feelings now would be..."

"A distraction we can't afford," Al finished.

"Exactly." She paused. "But later. When we're not running. When we've figured out how to stay alive and free. When the world isn't actively trying to cage us."

"Later," Al agreed.

"That's a promise," Catrin said. "Not like the marriage decree. A real promise. Between us."

"I'm good at keeping promises."

"I know." Catrin stood. "That's why I'm making it. Because I trust you to keep it."

She moved to the door, then paused. "Get some rest. I'll take the rest of your watch."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm too wired to sleep anyway." She glanced back at him. "And Al?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For refusing Queen Thorne. For keeping your promise. For being someone worth choosing."

She left before he could respond.

Al sat there in the quiet, processing.

They'd acknowledged feelings. Agreed to wait. Established partnership based on choice, not obligation.

They were what they were not yet.

Not lovers. Not just friends. Something undefined. Something honest.

Something that would have to wait until survival wasn't the primary concern.

But it was real. And it was chosen. And that mattered more than any Crown decree.

Al closed his eyes and let himself rest.
Tomorrow would bring new problems. New threats. New complications.
But tonight, they were free. They were together. They were equals.
And they'd made a promise to figure out the rest later.
That was enough.
For now, it was enough.

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Chapter Sixty-Six

CHAPTER 66

They needed answers.

Three days after the rescue, they'd discussed their options. Queen Thorne knew where they'd been. The Archive was still hunting them. The Triumvirate wanted Al contained. They were running out of safe places.

"There's an old Archive outpost," Rhyosyn said, studying a map she'd pulled from her pack. "Pre-Triumvirate. Abandoned during the consolidation. But it might have records—information about seventh sons, about prophecy mechanics."

"How old?" Al asked.

"Old enough that the wards predate the current System iteration." She traced a finger along a faded line on the map. "Built during the Dragon Wars. Maybe before. The Archive didn't just store books—they stored artifacts, relics. Things that predate modern understanding."

Catrin frowned. "Pre-System constructs can be unstable. They don't always recognize modern authority."

"We need to know what we're dealing with," Elowen said. "Al's a seventh son, but nobody knows what that actually means beyond 'bypasses covenant magic.' If there are records that explain it—explain why prophecies stalled for generations—they'd be in a place like this."

Al had been summoning supplies all morning. MREs stacked in the corner—enough for weeks. Water purification tablets. Medical kits with QuikClot, tourniquets, and antibiotics. Tools. Tarps. Rope. Everything the U.S. military issued, he could produce.

But he couldn't summon knowledge.

"How dangerous?" he asked.

"Unknown," Rhyosyn admitted. "But if we're going to survive long-term, we need information more than we need to hide."

They went at dawn. All five of them—leaving the safe house empty felt wrong, but splitting up felt worse.

The Archive outpost appeared through morning mist like a memory of better times. Stone construction, weathered but intact. Carved symbols covered the archway—old script predating modern language. Dragon sigils, Rhyosyn identified them as.

"Those haven't been used in centuries," she said quietly. "Since before dragons withdrew."

The door stood open. Not broken—just open, as if waiting.

Al felt something the moment he crossed the threshold. Not hostile. Not welcoming. Recognition without context. Like the building itself was aware of him.

"Anyone else feel that?" he asked.

"Feel what?" Rowena had her crossbow ready, scanning for threats.

"Like we're being watched. Measured."

Rhyosyn nodded slowly. "The wards are active. Old wards. They're... assessing us."

The interior was remarkably preserved. Dust, yes. Age, certainly. But no collapse. No decay. Just centuries of stillness. Shelves lined the walls—most empty, some holding ancient scrolls sealed in preservation cases.

They split up to search. Al moved toward what looked like a records chamber, Catrin beside him.

That's when the room changed.

Not physically. But the air thickened. Pressure built. And light—faint, blue-white, ancient—began seeping from the walls themselves.

The carved symbols started glowing.

"Al," Catrin said carefully. "Don't move."

He froze.

The light intensified, focusing on him. Scanning him. And then—

Pain.

Not physical. Deeper. Like something was reaching into his very essence and pulling threads apart to examine them.

Al gasped, dropping to one knee.

The System chimed—but the sound was wrong. Distorted. Like interference on a radio signal.

[EXTERNAL SCAN DETECTED]

Source: Pre-Integration Construct

Authority Level: PRIMORDIAL

Warning: Scan operating outside System parameters

Recommendation: Do not resist

Text appeared in his vision. Not the System's usual clean notifications. This was older. Rougher. Like someone carving words into stone.

BLOODLINE VERIFICATION INITIATED

Searching...

MATCH FOUND: Draconic Lineage (Clan Ashenbrand)

Confirmation: 97.3%

Status: RECOGNIZED

Al's breath came in ragged gasps. The pressure was immense.

Then the second line appeared.

MATCH FOUND: Draconic Lineage (Clan Stormwright)

Confirmation: 94.7%

Status: RECOGNIZED

The pressure doubled. Al couldn't breathe.

ERROR: CONFLICTING PRIMARY LINEAGE

WARNING: DUAL ORIGIN IMPOSSIBLE

ASSESSMENT: ANOMALY DETECTED

The ancient construct seemed to hesitate. The light flickered. Then—

RECALIBRATING...

MATCH FOUND: Draconic Lineage (Clan Emberhold)

Confirmation: 89.2%

Status: RECOGNIZED

ERROR: TERTIARY LINEAGE DETECTED

CRITICAL ANOMALY: THREE DRAGON CLANS IDENTIFIED

THIS CONFIGURATION SHOULD NOT EXIST

The light turned red. Alarms—actual, audible alarms—began echoing through the waystation.

Al collapsed fully now, the pressure crushing him.

Catrin was shouting something. The others were running toward them.

The System's voice cut through everything else:

[CRITICAL ALERT]

Pre-Integration construct has detected lineage anomaly

Subject: Aleric Tanim

Finding: Multiple dragon bloodlines present simultaneously

Assessment: IMPOSSIBLE CONFIGURATION

Dragon clans were isolated bloodlines.

Dragon clans did not interbreed.

Dragon clans maintained genetic separation for millennia.
Overlap should not occur.
Overlap cannot occur.
Overlap is occurring.
[SYSTEM ESCALATION]
Flagging for Archive Review
Flagging for Triumvirate Authority
Flagging for...
The message cut off.

The ancient construct's light was cycling now—blue to red to gold—like it couldn't decide what Al was.

More text carved itself into his vision:

SUBJECT CONTAINS:
- Ashenbrand markers (Fire/Ash lineage)
- Stormwright markers (Storm/Sky lineage)
- Emberhold markers (Earth/Mountain lineage)

GENEALOGICAL IMPOSSIBILITY CONFIRMED
DRAGONS DID NOT MIX LINES
DRAGONS MAINTAINED CLAN PURITY
DRAGONS ENFORCED SEPARATION
HOW DOES THIS ENTITY EXIST?

Al tried to speak. He couldn't. The pressure was too much.

Then Rhyosyn was there, hands glowing with spell-work. "I'm trying to shut it down—it won't respond—it's too old—"

"Don't shut it down," Al managed to gasp. "Let it... finish..."

The construct seemed to hear him. The light stabilized. Red-gold now. Warning color mixed with acknowledgment.

ANALYSIS COMPLETE
SUBJECT IS:
- Intersection of separated lineages
- Carrier of incompatible genetic signatures
- Living impossibility by draconic law

CLASSIFICATION: ERROR
SUBCLASSIFICATION: Forbidden Convergence
RECOMMENDATION: [CORRUPTED]
SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION: [CORRUPTED]
FINAL RECOMMENDATION: Observe. Report. Do not engage.

THIS MATTER EXCEEDS LOCAL AUTHORITY

The pressure released all at once.

Al collapsed fully, gasping for air. Catrin caught him before he hit the stone floor.

The ancient light faded. The alarms stopped. The waystation fell silent again.

But the System notification remained, hovering in his vision:

[LINEAGE SCAN COMPLETE]

Results logged.

Anomaly confirmed.

Three dragon bloodlines detected in a single subject.

Historical record indicates this should not be possible.

Dragon clans maintained genetic isolation.

Crossbreeding between clans was culturally forbidden.

Physiologically improbable.

Yet evidence is conclusive.

Subject Aleric Tanim carries markers from:

Clan Ashenbrand (Fire lineage)

Clan Stormwright (Storm lineage)

Clan Emberhold (Earth lineage)

This represents either:

- Genealogical impossibility
- Evidence of pre-Separation breeding
- Indication that dragon isolation was incomplete

Classification: BLOODLINE ERROR

Flagged for investigation.

Oversight elevated to maximum.

Al lay there, vision swimming, trying to process.

Three dragon bloodlines.

Not one. Three.

In him. Simultaneously. Overlapping.

Something that shouldn't exist.

"What... what does that mean?" he managed to ask.

Rhyosyn knelt beside him, her expression stunned. "It means your ancestry isn't just draconic. It's multiply draconic. From clans that never interbred. That maintained absolute separation for thousands of years."

"How?"

"It shouldn't be possible." Catrin's voice was tight. "Dragons kept their bloodlines pure. It was cultural law. Religious law. The clans were distinct. Separate. They didn't mix."

"But I'm mixed," Al said.

"Yes." Rhyosyn looked at him like he was a puzzle she couldn't solve. "You're an intersection. A convergence. Something that defies dragon history."

Elowen had her hand on her sword, scanning for threats. "The construct called it a 'Forbidden Convergence.' That's not just rare. That's impossible."

"Apparently not," Rowena said quietly. "Since you exist."

Al pushed himself upright slowly. His whole body ached. "So what does this mean practically?"

"It means," Rhyosyn said carefully, "that you're not just descended from dragons. You're descended from dragons who shouldn't have produced offspring together. Which means either the historical record is wrong about dragon clan isolation..."

"Or something happened that broke the rules," Catrin finished.

The System chimed again. Softer this time.

[ADDITIONAL NOTATION]

Dragon clan separation ended approximately 2,000 years ago.

Official reason: The Withdrawal.

Dragons chose to step back from direct governance.

This event predates current System architecture.

Records from that period are incomplete.

Possibility: Bloodline mixing occurred during the Withdrawal period.

Possibility: Subject's ancestry traces to pre-Withdrawal events.

Possibility: Dragons did not actually maintain pure separation.

Conclusion: Unknown.

Classification: Requires investigation beyond System authority.

Al read the notification twice. "The System doesn't know. It's admitting it doesn't know."

"The System never admits uncertainty," Rhyosyn said. "This is... unprecedented."

"Everything about you is unprecedented," Elowen muttered.

Catrin helped Al to his feet. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah. I think so." He steadied himself. "We should get what we came for and leave. This place..."

"Is going to report back to something," Rhyosyn finished. "Pre-System constructs have protocols. They observe. They record. And they send information to whatever authority they were designed to serve."

"Which in this case would be...?"

"Dragons." She met his eyes. "Or whatever's left of them."

The words had barely left her mouth when the temperature dropped.

Not gradually. Instantly. Their breath misted in the air. Frost began spreading across the stone floor, radiating from the chamber where Al had been scanned.

"Out," Catrin said immediately. "Now."

They moved toward the exit. But the door slammed shut—not by wind, not by mechanism. By intent.

The ancient symbols on the walls blazed to life. Not just glowing now. Burning. White-gold light so bright it hurt to look at.

And then the air tore open.

Not a portal. Not a summon. A presence forcing itself into reality through sheer authority.

The space above the scanning chamber distorted. Light bent. Gravity shifted. And something vast pushed through the barrier between wherever it had been and here.

A form materialized.

Serpentine. Massive even while compressed into the confines of the chamber. Scales reflected every color and none—platinum-silver that somehow contained all hues at once. Eyes like molten gold, ancient beyond comprehension, were fixed directly on Al.

Wings—seven of them—folded against a body too large for the space, reality bending to accommodate it rather than the dragon diminishing.

The voice, when it came, was not sound. It was pressure. Authority. Command made manifest.

"THE CONSTRUCT HAS SUMMONED ME. THE JUDGE ANSWERS WHEN IMPOSSIBILITIES OCCUR."

Everyone dropped to their knees. Not voluntarily. The weight of the dragon's presence made standing impossible.

Everyone except Al.

He was on one knee, trembling with effort, but not prostrate. The dragon's eyes narrowed.

"YOU RESIST THE WEIGHT. FOREIGN INTEGRATION. AMERICAN MAGIC. CURIOUS."

"Who..." Al managed to gasp out. "Who are you?"

The dragon's head tilted slightly, an almost amused gesture.

"I AM KNOWN BY MANY NAMES. THE PLATINUM WARDEN. THE FIRST SCALE. THE JUDGE OF EMBERS. THE ASCENDED FATHER OF DRAGONS."

A pause. Golden eyes examined him with the focus of a jeweler studying a flawed diamond.

"I AM THE ONE WHO ENFORCED THE SEPARATION. WHO DECREED THAT DRAGON CLANS WOULD NOT MIX THEIR BLOOD. WHO ESTABLISHED THE COVENANTS THAT KEPT LINEAGES PURE."

Another pause. Longer this time.

"AND YOU... ARE THE PROOF THAT MY LAW WAS BROKEN."

Al's breath came in ragged gasps. "I didn't... break anything. I was born this way."

"PRECISELY THE PROBLEM."

The Platinum Warden moved closer. Reality warped around it. The chamber expanded—or seemed to—accommodate its presence without actually changing size.

"THREE BLOODLINES. ASHENBRAND. STORMWRIGHT. EMBERHOLD. FIRE, STORM, AND EARTH. ELEMENTS THAT SHOULD NEVER CONVERGE IN ONE VESSEL."

The dragon's gaze intensified.

"WHEN I WITHDREW—WHEN WE ALL WITHDREW—IT WAS WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT CERTAIN LAWS WOULD PERSIST. THAT SEPARATION WOULD HOLD. THAT THE CLANS WOULD REMAIN DISTINCT EVEN IN OUR ABSENCE."

"BUT HERE YOU STAND. A CONVERGENCE. AN INTERSECTION. SOMETHING THAT SHOULD NOT EXIST YET DOES."

"I didn't ask for this," Al said.

"NO. YOU DID NOT. WHICH MAKES YOU EITHER A COSMIC ACCIDENT..."

The Platinum Warden leaned down until its massive head was level with Al. Close enough that Al could see each individual scale, each containing

what looked like entire landscapes of color.

"OR EVIDENCE OF SOMETHING FAR MORE DELIBERATE."

The dragon straightened.

"THE CONSTRUCT SCANNED YOU. FOUND THREE CLAN MARKERS. DECLARED YOU IMPOSSIBLE. AND SUMMONED ME TO JUDGE WHETHER YOU SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE EXISTING."

Al's stomach dropped. "And?"

"I AM STILL DECIDING."

The Platinum Warden circled him slowly. Al could feel the weight of its gaze like a physical presence, examining every aspect of his being.

"YOU ARE ALSO A SEVENTH SON. ANOTHER STATISTICAL IMPOSSIBILITY. ANOTHER CONVERGENCE OF UNLIKELY FACTORS."

"YOU ARE FOREIGN-BORN. OUTSIDE OUR SYSTEM. CARRYING MAGIC WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND."

"YOU ARE EARLY. THE PATHS SHOULD NOT BE OPEN YET. THE TIME IS NOT RIGHT."

"BUT HERE YOU ARE ANYWAY."

The dragon stopped circling and faced him directly.

"TELL ME, ALERIC TANIM OF EARTH. DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE?"

"No," Al admitted. "I don't."

"HONEST. GOOD."

The dragon's expression—if something that vast could be said to have expressions—shifted to something resembling approval.

"YOU ARE A KEY. FORGED WITHOUT INTENTION. SHAPED BY CIRCUMSTANCE. BUT A KEY NONETHELESS."

"THREE DRAGON CLANS CONVERGED IN YOUR BLOODLINE. THAT HAS NOT OCCURRED SINCE BEFORE THE SEPARATION. BEFORE THE COVENANTS. BEFORE WE WITHDREW FROM DIRECT RULE."

"THE LAST TIME SUCH A CONVERGENCE EXISTED..."

The Platinum Warden paused. Something like memory—or regret—flickered across those ancient eyes.

"THE LAST TIME, IT OPENED A PATH THAT SHOULD HAVE REMAINED SEALED."

"What path?" Al asked.

"ONE THAT EVEN I CANNOT WALK. ONE THAT REQUIRES... SPECIFIC CONDITIONS."

The dragon studied him for a long moment.

"YOU ARE EARLY. THE CONVERGENCE WAS NOT MEANT TO OCCUR FOR ANOTHER GENERATION. BUT THE PATHS DO NOT WAIT ON MORTAL CONVENIENCE."

"AND SO I MUST DECIDE: DO I ERASE THIS IMPOSSIBILITY BEFORE IT CAN FULFILL ITS PURPOSE? OR DO I ALLOW IT TO CONTINUE, KNOWING WHAT IT MIGHT OPEN?"

Al forced himself to meet those golden eyes. "I'm not asking you to spare me. But I deserve to know what I supposedly am before you decide whether I live or die."

The Platinum Warden's head tilted again. This time, definitely amused.

"DEFIANT EVEN UNDER JUDGMENT. PERHAPS THAT IS THE AMERICAN MAGIC AT WORK. OR PERHAPS THAT IS SIMPLY YOU."

The dragon paused. Those golden eyes narrowed, focusing with an intensity that made the previous examination look casual.

"AMERICAN MAGIC. FOREIGN INTEGRATION. I DISMISSED THOSE TERMS AS SYSTEM CLASSIFICATION. BUT..."

The Platinum Warden leaned closer again. This time, the pressure increased tenfold. Al gasped as something vast and incomprehensible examined not just his bloodline, but his very origin.

"YOU ARE NOT FROM THIS WORLD."

Not a question. A statement of fact that hit like a physical blow.

"YOU ARE FROM... ELSEWHERE. ANOTHER REALITY ENTIRELY."

The dragon's voice changed. The authority remained, but something else crept in. Confusion. And beneath that—the first hint of genuine alarm.

"BUT THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE."

"DRAGON BLOODLINES ARE TIED TO THIS REALITY. TO THIS WORLD. TO THE ORIGINAL COMPACT MADE WHEN WE DESCENDED FROM THE FIRST FLAME."

"THEY CANNOT EXIST ELSEWHERE. THEY SHOULD NOT EXIST ELSEWHERE."

"YET YOU..."

The Platinum Warden pulled back slightly, as if recoiling from a truth too vast to comprehend.

"YOU CARRY ASHENBRAND MARKERS. STORMWRIGHT MARKERS. EMBERHOLD MARKERS. TRUE MARKERS. NOT COPIES. NOT ECHOES. THE GENUINE BLOODLINES OF THIS REALITY."

"BUT YOU WERE BORN IN ANOTHER REALITY. ON A WORLD CALLED EARTH. IN A PLACE CALLED AMERICA."

The dragon's seven wings unfurled slightly. An involuntary gesture—perhaps the first uncontrolled movement it had made.

"HOW?"

The word echoed with genuine bewilderment. Perhaps for the first time in millennia, this being had asked a question it couldn't answer.

"HOW DO THE BLOODLINES OF THIS WORLD EXIST IN YOURS?"

"HOW DID THREE DRAGON CLANS—MINE, MY CHILDREN, MY LAW—SOMEHOW MANIFEST IN A REALITY WHERE DRAGONS NEVER EXISTED?"

Al tried to speak. He couldn't. The pressure was too much.

The Platinum Warden noticed and eased back slightly, just enough for Al to breathe.

"I don't know," Al gasped. "I didn't even know I had dragon blood until I came here. My mother never told me who my father was. I just... I'm just American. Human. Marine."

"HUMAN."

The dragon said the word as if examining a puzzle piece that didn't fit anywhere.

"YOU CLAIM TO BE HUMAN. FROM A WORLD WITHOUT DRAGONS. WITHOUT THE SYSTEM. WITHOUT MAGIC AS WE UNDERSTAND IT."

"YET YOU CARRY THE GENETIC SIGNATURE OF THREE DISTINCT DRAGON CLANS. SIGNATURES THAT PREDATE THE SYSTEM. THAT PREDATE EVEN MY WITHDRAWAL."

"SIGNATURES THAT SHOULD ONLY EXIST IN THIS REALITY. IN THIS WORLD. IN THE BLOODLINES I PERSONALLY OVERSAW."

The Platinum Warden began pacing. Reality rippled with each movement.

"THERE ARE ONLY THREE EXPLANATIONS."

"ONE: THE BLOODLINES SOMEHOW CROSSED BETWEEN REALITIES. WHICH SHOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE. BLOODLINES ARE BOUND TO THEIR REALITY OF ORIGIN."

"TWO: YOUR REALITY AND THIS REALITY ARE NOT SEPARATE. THEY ARE SOMEHOW CONNECTED. PERHAPS THEY ALWAYS WERE. WHICH WOULD INVALIDATE EVERY UNDERSTANDING WE HAVE OF DIMENSIONAL SEPARATION."

"THREE..."

The dragon stopped and turned to face Al directly.

"THREE: DRAGONS EXISTED IN YOUR REALITY. LIVED THERE. BRED THERE. ESTABLISHED BLOODLINES THERE."

"AND SOMEHOW, IMPOSSIBLY, THOSE BLOODLINES MATCH MINE EXACTLY."

A longer pause. When the Platinum Warden spoke again, its voice was quieter. Almost... unsettled.

"WHICH MEANS EITHER I WAS WRONG ABOUT THE NATURE OF REALITY ITSELF..."

"OR SOMETHING FAR OLDER THAN ME HAS BEEN MANIPULATING EVENTS ACROSS MULTIPLE REALITIES FOR PURPOSES I CANNOT FATHOM."

The dragon's gaze intensified again.

"TELL ME TRUE, ALERIC TANIM. IN YOUR WORLD—THIS 'EARTH'—ARE THERE STORIES OF DRAGONS?"

Al managed a nod. "Yes. Myths. Legends. Every culture has them."

"DESCRIBE THEM."

"Fire-breathing. Massive. Some with wings, some serpentine. Some hoard treasure. Some grant wisdom. Some destroy cities." Al's voice grew steadier as he spoke. "Western dragons. Eastern dragons. Different types. Different powers. But always... always ancient. Always powerful. Always tied to elements."

"ELEMENTS."

The Platinum Warden's wings furled tightly against its body.

"FIRE. STORM. EARTH. WATER. SKY."

"THE SAME ELEMENTS AS OUR CLANS."

"THE SAME STRUCTURE. THE SAME POWER DISTRIBUTION. THE SAME... EVERYTHING."

The dragon was silent for a long moment. When it spoke again, its voice carried something Al hadn't heard before.

Fear.

"YOU ARE NOT JUST AN IMPOSSIBILITY, ALERIC TANIM."

"YOU ARE PROOF OF AN IMPOSSIBILITY."

"PROOF THAT DRAGONS—MY BLOODLINES, MY CHILDREN, MY LAW—SOMEHOW EXIST ACROSS MULTIPLE REALITIES."

"WHICH RAISES A QUESTION I HAVE NEVER CONSIDERED IN ALL MY MILLENNIA OF EXISTENCE:"

"WHERE DID WE COME FROM?"

"IF WE EXIST HERE AND THERE, IF OUR BLOODLINES CAN MANIFEST IN REALITIES WITHOUT MAGIC, WITHOUT THE SYSTEM, WITHOUT ANY KNOWN MECHANISM FOR OUR CREATION..."

"THEN WHAT CREATED US?"

"AND WHY?"

The pressure in the room had changed. Not lighter—different. The Platinum Warden was no longer judging Al.

It was disturbed by what Al represented.

"I CAME HERE TO JUDGE WHETHER AN IMPOSSIBLE CONVERGENCE SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO EXIST."

"BUT YOU HAVE SHOWN ME SOMETHING FAR MORE TROUBLING."

"YOU ARE NOT JUST A CONVERGENCE OF MY BLOODLINES."

"YOU ARE EVIDENCE THAT REALITY ITSELF IS NOT WHAT I BELIEVED IT TO BE."

The dragon's voice softened—if something that resonant could be said to soften.

"I WILL NOT UNMAKE YOU. I CANNOT. BECAUSE IF I DID, I WOULD BE DESTROYING EVIDENCE OF A TRUTH FAR LARGER THAN ANY LAW I EVER ESTABLISHED."

"BUT UNDERSTAND THIS, SEVENTH SON OF ANOTHER EARTH:"

"YOU CARRY A WEIGHT FAR HEAVIER THAN THREE BLOODLINES."

"YOU CARRY PROOF THAT DRAGONS MAY NOT HAVE ORIGINATED IN THIS REALITY AT ALL."

"THAT WE—THE OLDEST, THE FIRST, THE ASCENDED—MAY OURSELVES BE ECHOES OF SOMETHING OLDER."

"AND IF THAT IS TRUE..."

The Platinum Warden paused, as if considering whether to speak the next words.

"THEN THE PATHS YOU WILL OPEN MAY LEAD SOMEWHERE FAR STRANGER THAN I EVER IMAGINED."

The presence began to fade. The pressure eased.

"THE PATHS ARE OPENING. TOO SOON. TOO FAST. BUT OPENING NONETHELESS."

"WHEN THEY FULLY OPEN, YOU WILL BE REQUIRED TO WALK THEM. NOT AS CHAMPION. NOT AS HERO."

"AS KEY."

"AS PERMISSION."

"AS CONVERGENCE."

The last of the light faded. The temperature returned to normal. The door unsealed with a soft click.

The Platinum Warden was gone.

But its words remained, echoing in the sudden silence.

Al collapsed fully this time. Catrin caught him, lowering him carefully to the floor.

"What..." Rhyosyn's voice shook. "What in all the realms was that?"

"The Platinum Warden," Elowen whispered. "The First Scale. The Ascended Father. I thought... I thought those were myths."

"Not myths," Rowena said quietly. "Just absent. Until now."

Al lay there, trying to process what had just happened.

A primordial dragon. One of the originals. Maybe the original. The one who'd enforced clan separation. Who'd established the laws that prevented exactly what Al was.

And it had almost killed him.

It would have been within its rights to kill him.

But hadn't.

Because he was "early" for something. A key for paths not yet fully open.

"We need to leave," Catrin said. "Now. Before anything else decides to investigate."

They helped Al to his feet. He was shaky but mobile.

As they moved toward the exit, Al glanced back at the chamber one last time.

The scanning construct had gone dark again. Dormant. Waiting for the next impossibility to walk through its doors.

They searched the records chamber afterward but found little. The truly valuable information had been removed long ago—either by the Archive during consolidation or by looters after abandonment.

But Al couldn't shake the feeling that something fundamental had shifted.

Three dragon bloodlines.

A Forbidden Convergence.

An impossibility that existed anyway.

He'd known he had dragon ancestry. Keeper Morrigan had confirmed it. The System had acknowledged it.

But this was different. This wasn't just having dragon blood.

This was being something that dragons themselves had forbidden.

As they rode away from the outpost, Al looked back once.

The building stood silent, waiting, watching.

And somewhere—in whatever remained of dragon authority—something now knew he existed.

Something that would have questions.

Questions Al didn't have answers for.

Not yet.

But the System's final notification stayed with him:

[REMINDER]

Bloodline error acknowledged.

Investigation pending.

Subject classified as: Living impossibility.

Proceed with caution.

You are early.

Early for what, the System didn't say.

But Al had a feeling he'd find out soon enough.

Whether he wanted to or not.

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Chapter Sixty-Seven

CHAPTER 67

They didn't return to the safe house immediately.

After The Platinum Warden's departure, Rhyosyn insisted they search the Archive outpost more thoroughly. "If a primordial dragon was summoned here, there's a reason. This place stores something important."

Al was still shaky from the encounter, but he nodded. The dragon's words kept echoing: *"You are early.""The paths are opening.""You carry proof that reality itself is not what I believed it to be."*

They split up, searching carefully. Most of the records had been removed or destroyed during the Archive consolidation. But Rhyosyn found something in a sealed vault beneath the main chamber.

Not scrolls. Not books.

Memory crystals.

"These predate paper records," she explained, handling one carefully. "They're magically encoded. Direct knowledge transfer. The Archive stopped using them centuries ago because they're too... raw. Too unfiltered."

"Can you read them?" Catrin asked.

"If we find the activation pedestal." Rhyosyn moved deeper into the vault. "They need specific—there."

A stone pedestal stood in the center of the vault, carved with dragon sigils identical to those at the entrance. Rhyosyn placed the crystal carefully in the depression at its center.

Light flooded the room.

Not physical light. Memory. Knowledge. Information flowed directly into their minds as if someone were speaking words they could hear without sound.

RECORD: The Arbitration Era

Year 2,247 of the First Compact

Before the System, there were dragons.

They came from... elsewhere. The memory is unclear. Perhaps they did not know themselves. But they came bearing law, structure, order.

The world was chaos before dragons. Factions warred. Magic ran wild. Bloodlines collapsed into genetic dead ends. Entire species teetered on extinction.

The dragons did not conquer. They mediated.

They established the Arbitration Courts—neutral ground where disputes could be resolved without violence and treaties enforced by something more than hope.

They gave their own bloodlines as a guarantee. Dragon-descended children in key positions. Living proof that dragons had stakes in mortal survival.

For two thousand years, it worked.

Dragons were arbiters, judges—the final court of appeal when all other law failed.

They did not rule. They balanced.

The memory shifted.

RECORD: The Fracture

Year 4,831 of the First Compact

Something changed.

The exact cause is lost. Debated. Some say the dragons grew tired of mortal conflicts. Others claim they foresaw something that required their withdrawal.

The official record states: "The Arbiters have completed their mandate. The foundations are laid. We step back so you may stand."

But the unofficial records—the ones sealed in these crystals—tell a different story.

The dragons withdrew because they were no longer needed.

No. That's wrong.

They withdrew because they were no longer sufficient.

Something was coming. Something that required a different kind of order. A structure that could enforce law without judgment. That could maintain balance without wisdom.

The System.

Another shift. This memory felt newer, more recent.

RECORD: The Transition

Year 1 of the New Calibration (4,962 of the First Compact)

The System activated.

Not created. Activated. As if it had been waiting. Dormant.

Within one generation, every aspect of dragon arbitration was replaced by System functions: levels, classes, experience, progression—rules encoded into reality itself.

The dragons did not resist this change. They facilitated it.

They taught mortals how to interface with the System, how to accept its authority, how to trust procedural law over personal judgment.

And then they left.

Most withdrew entirely—to wherever dragons go when they are not present.

Some remained, watching and observing, enforcing only when the System itself could not.

Like The Platinum Warden. The First Scale. The one who maintained the Bloodline Covenants even after their withdrawal.

The records note his titles with something like fear:

"The Judge of Embers does not intervene lightly. When he appears, it is because something has violated laws older than the System—laws that predate even dragon arrival."

"Pray he never has reason to judge you."

The light faded. The memory ended.

They stood in silence, processing.

"Dragons weren't rulers," Elowen said slowly. "They were... peacekeepers?"

"Arbiters," Rhyosyn corrected. "Neutral judges. They mediated between factions so the world didn't tear itself apart."

"And then they left," Rowena added. "Deliberately. Because the System could do their job better."

"Not better," Catrin said. "Different. The System enforces rules. It doesn't judge whether the rules are right. It just... applies them consistently and predictably."

Al thought about that. About the difference between law and justice. Between order and legitimacy.

"The dragons judged," he said. "They looked at situations and decided what was fair, what was right. The System doesn't do that. It just follows programming."

"Which makes it stable," Rhyosyn said. "Predictable. You know what the System will do because it always does the same thing. Dragons... dragons

could surprise you. They might rule differently based on context."

"That's terrifying if you're trying to build a civilization," Elowen noted. "You need consistency, predictability—laws that apply the same way every time."

"But you lose wisdom," Catrin argued. "You lose the ability to say, 'this rule doesn't fit this situation.' The System can't adapt. Can't make exceptions."

"Except it does," Al said quietly. "With me. It makes exceptions all the time: Foreign Integration, American Magic, Bloodline Error. The System keeps flagging me as impossible but lets me exist anyway."

They looked at him.

"Because you're early," Rhyosyn said. "That's what The Platinum Warden said. You're early. Which means..."

"Which means something is supposed to happen," Al finished. "Something the dragons knew about. Something they withdrew to make room for. And I'm part of it, but I showed up before everything was ready."

Silence again.

"The System enforces order," Catrin said slowly. "But the dragons enforced legitimacy. They made sure power was used justly, not just legally. When they left, that check disappeared."

"And now we have a world where the Crown can decree marriages," Elowen added bitterly. "Where Houses can claim people as property. Where everything is legal but nothing is just."

"The System doesn't care about justice," Rowena said. "It cares about rules. About balance. About maintaining structure."

"Which is what the dragons wanted," Rhyosyn said. "They built the foundations for the System. Taught mortals to accept it. And then left us with a machine that enforces order without questioning whether that order is good."

Al felt something click into place. "That's why The Platinum Warden was disturbed. Not just because I'm impossible, but because I'm evidence that dragons might not have built the System at all. That they might have just... found it. Activated it. Used it."

"And if they didn't build it," Catrin said, "then who did?"

No one had an answer.

They gathered the memory crystals and left the vault, but the question followed them.

Dragons as arbiters. Judges. Peacekeepers who deliberately withdrew and left behind a System that enforces order without wisdom.

A System that Al kept breaking.

Not by violating rules, but by being exceptions the rules couldn't handle.

"You are early," Al muttered. "Early for what?"

The crystals had no answer, but they'd given him context.

Dragons hadn't abandoned the world; they'd stepped back, making room for something else. Something that could maintain order at scale.

But order without legitimacy was just control.

And Al was living proof that the System's control was incomplete.

Atherai - Safe House

Al sat by the fire that night, thinking about dragons, systems, and order without wisdom.

The System enforced rules. Dragons had enforced legitimacy.

But what happened when the rules were wrong?

The System couldn't answer that. It just followed programming.

But dragons could. Dragons judged, adapted, and made decisions based on context and wisdom.

And then they'd left, trusting that the System would be enough.

Except it wasn't. Not for him. Not for the seventh-son prophecies that had stalled for generations. Not for the bloodline convergence that should have been impossible.

He was early for something. Something the dragons had known was coming.

Something that required both order and judgment, structure and wisdom, rules and exceptions.

Something the System alone couldn't handle.

The fire crackled. Al closed his eyes.

"You are early," he muttered. "But for what?"

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Chapter Sixty-Eight

CHAPTER 68

The first acknowledgment came from an unexpected source.

Three days after leaving the Archive outpost, they stopped at a neutral trading post on the border between Triumvirate territory and the Western Baronies—a place where information flowed as freely as coin and questions were rarely asked.

Al stayed with the horses while the others went inside to resupply. He had learned that his presence attracted too much attention in crowded places.

An old woman approached him. Not a trader. Not a traveler. Something else. Her eyes were clouded white, but she moved with the certainty of someone who saw more than most.

"Foreign-born," she said. Not a question.

Al nodded carefully. "Yes, ma'am."

She stood there, head tilted as if listening to something he couldn't hear. Then she reached out and touched his hand—just once. Brief contact.

Her expression changed. Recognition. Not of him personally, but of something in him.

"You are early," she said quietly.

Al felt his stomach drop. "What?"

"The paths are opening, but slowly. Too slowly." She pulled her hand back. "You walk them before they are ready. Before the marks align. Before the gates acknowledge."

"I don't understand—"

"You will." She turned to leave, then paused. "Tell the dragon-touched: the convergence was not meant for this generation. But it has happened anyway. The old ones are... unsettled."

She walked away before Al could ask anything else.

When the others returned, Al told them what had happened.

Rhyosyn went very still. "A seer. An actual, System-recognized oracle." She looked at Al with something like alarm. "They don't speak to random people. If she approached you..."

"It means he's been noticed," Catrin finished. "By forces that predate the Triumvirate. Maybe predate the System."

"She said I was early," Al said. "The Platinum Warden said the same thing. What does that mean?"

No one had an answer.

The second acknowledgment came from a System notification.

They were traveling through disputed territory when Al's vision suddenly filled with text. Not the usual clean notifications. This was different. Older formatting. Different structure.

[HERITAGE PROTOCOL ACTIVATED]

Legacy Status: Dragon-Touched (Multiple Lineages)

Condition Status: Seventh Son (Confirmed)

Prophecy Alignment: 47 unresolved seventh-son clauses detected

WARNING: Temporal Sequence Disruption

Expected Arrival: Generation 3, Cycle 7 (approximately 220 years from present)

Actual Arrival: Generation 1, Cycle 2 (current)

Discrepancy: YOU ARE EARLY

Consequence Assessment:

Prophecy infrastructure incomplete

Support systems not yet established

Required authorities not yet manifested

Pathway markers absent or misaligned

Current Status: PATH EXISTS BUT REMAINS UNSEALED

Recommendation: Await proper sequence.

Note: Subject has no capacity to await. Progression will continue.

System Classification: TEMPORAL ANOMALY - PERMITTED

The notification faded.

Al stared at empty air for a long moment.

"What is it?" Catrin asked, noticing his expression.

"The System just told me I'm 220 years too early." Al's voice was flat. "Whatever I'm supposed to do, it's not supposed to happen for another two centuries."

Rhyosyn's eyes widened. "That's impossible. The System doesn't make mistakes about timing. Prophecies activate when conditions are met, not before."

"Apparently, I'm the exception," Al said. "Again."

"What did it say about the path?" Elowen asked.

"That it exists. But it's not ready. Not sealed. Whatever that means."

They rode in silence after that, each processing what it meant that Al had arrived generations before he was expected.

They needed information about seventh-son mechanics, and Rhyosyn knew someone who might help—an old mentor who had retired from active service but still maintained private records.

The scholar was ancient, easily in her eighties, possibly older. She listened to their questions with patience, then pulled out a massive tome bound in leather that looked older than the kingdom.

"The seventh-son clauses," she said, flipping through pages. "Yes. There are forty-seven distinct prophecies that require a seventh son of a seventh son. All of them stalled. Some for centuries."

"Why?" Al asked.

"Because the condition is statistical. Rare. And becoming rarer." The scholar looked at him over half-moon spectacles. "A seventh son requires a father with seven sons. In a world where men are scarce and controlled, that pattern occurs perhaps once every few generations. And even then, the seventh son must be..."

She trailed off, studying Al more closely.

"You're him, aren't you? The foreign-born. The one the rumors speak of."

"Yeah."

The scholar closed the book slowly. "Then I must tell you something the Archive does not widely share." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "The prophecies involving seventh sons were designed with a specific timeline. A convergence point. When multiple conditions would align simultaneously."

"When?" Catrin asked.

"I don't know, but a far off time. The projections indicated that by then, enough seventh sons would have accumulated that one might achieve the full convergence. Multiple bloodlines. Multiple prophecies. All intersecting."

She looked at Al with something like pity.

"But you are here now. Carrying all the markers but arriving before ..."

"Before?" Al asked.

"The authorities who would recognize your role. The paths that would be prepared." The scholar shook her head. "You are walking a road that does

not yet have bridges. Opening doors that were meant to remain sealed until the proper time."

"Why didn't the System stop me?" Al asked. "If I'm too early?"

"Because you also meet the conditions. The System recognizes truth. You are obviously a seventh son. You do carry dragon lineage. You have fulfilled requirements that were meant to be impossible." The scholar smiled faintly. "The System cannot deny what is factually true, even when it violates temporal expectations."

"So what happens now?"

"Now?" The scholar closed her eyes. "Now you become a problem every faction must account for. Your very existence proves the timeline was wrong. That prophecy can activate out of sequence." She opened her eyes again.

"You are early, young man. And that terrifies those who planned for your arrival because they are not ready for you. And neither is the world."

Matron-Commander Maera Arwen had summoned them to a secure meeting in a military outpost. Not an arrest. An interview.

She sat across from Al with the bearing of a career soldier and the eyes of someone who had seen too much.

"I've been receiving reports," she said without preamble. "From various sources. All of them say the same thing about you."

"What's that?" Al asked.

"That you shouldn't exist yet." She leaned forward. "I've consulted with the Archive, the Temple, and independent scholars. All agree on one thing: the convergence of conditions you represent was projected for years from now."

"I've heard that," Al said. "Multiple times."

"Then you understand the problem." Maera's expression was grim. "The institutions that were meant to manage your arrival do not exist. The treaties that would govern your actions are not yet written. The authorities who would recognize your role have not yet manifested."

"So what do I do?" Al asked. "Wait?"

"No." Maera surprised him. "You do what you've been doing. You survive. You adapt. You force the world to acknowledge that prophecy does not wait for our convenience."

She stood, moving to a map on the wall.

"The world is not ready for you, Aleric Tanim. But you are here anyway. That means we must adapt faster than we planned. Build support structures in years rather than decades. Prepare for convergence now rather than later."

She looked at him directly.

"You are early. But that does not make you wrong. It makes you a catalyst. The question is whether we can build the framework around you fast enough to prevent collapse."

The fifth acknowledgment came from something older.

Al felt drawn toward it. Not compulsion. Recognition.

He dismounted and approached alone.

The shrine was simple. A stone pillar carved with symbols that predated current language. Dragon sigils mixed with something else. Something older.

When Al touched the stone, it warmed beneath his hand.

Light flickered. Not bright. Just present.

Words formed in his mind. Not speech. Not System notifications. Something in between.

CONVERGENCE DETECTED

TEMPORAL ASSESSMENT: YOU WALK BEFORE THE ROAD IS PAVED

YOU OPEN BEFORE THE SEAL IS READY

YOU ARE EARLY

BUT YOU ARE HERE

THE PATH ACKNOWLEDGES

THOUGH INCOMPLETE, IT ACCEPTS YOUR TREAD

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

THE OUTCOME REMAINS UNCERTAIN

The light faded. The warmth dissipated.

Al stepped back from the shrine, his hand tingling.

When he rejoined the others, Catrin asked what had happened.

"The shrine recognized me," Al said. "Said the same thing everyone else has been saying. I'm early. The path isn't ready. But it's accepting me anyway."

"What does that mean practically?" Rowena asked.

"I don't have a choice," Al replied. "I can't wait 220 years for the world to be ready. So the world is going to have to catch up."

That night, they made camp in a defensible position. Al sat by the fire, thinking about everything he'd heard.

Five different sources. Five different acknowledgments. All saying the same thing.

You are early.

The Platinum Warden. The seer. The System. The scholar. The shrine.

All of them recognizing that he'd arrived before he was supposed to. Before the world was ready. Before the paths were prepared.

But also all of them acknowledging that it didn't matter. He was here. The conditions were met. The convergence had begun.

Centuries ahead of schedule.

Al stared at the flames, thinking about the three clans: Emberhold. Stormwright. Ashenbrand.

Earth. Wind. Fire.

He almost laughed. Of course. Of course it would be those three.

"What's funny?" Catrin asked, sitting down beside him.

"Nothing. Just..." Al shook his head. "The three clans in my bloodline. Emberhold - earth and mountain. Stormwright - wind and sky. Ashenbrand - fire and ash."

"Yes?"

"Back home, there was this band. They called themselves Earth, Wind & Fire." Al smiled faintly. "Huge in the '70s and '80s. My mom loved them. Used to play their music all the time."

Catrin looked confused. "A band named after elements?"

"Yeah. They were all about harmony. Unity. Bringing different things together into something greater." Al prodded the fire with a stick. "Funny that I'm carrying the same three elements. Like the universe has a sense of humor about these things."

"Or perhaps," Rhyosyn said from across the fire, "those elements have always belonged together. In your world and ours."

Al thought about that. About dragons enforcing separation. About clans that were never supposed to mix. About a barrier between realities that was never meant to break.

"Maybe that's the point," he said quietly. "Maybe they were always meant to work together. And separating them was the mistake."

"The Platinum Warden wouldn't agree," Elowen noted.

"No," Al agreed. "He wouldn't. He spent millennia keeping them apart. And now I'm walking around with all three, proving it can be done."

He looked at the flames again. Earth to ground it. Wind to carry it. Fire to transform it.

"Getting the band back together," he muttered.

"What?" Catrin asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking." Al stood, brushing off his pants. "The three elements. They work together. Balance each other. Earth stabilizes, wind moves, fire changes. You need all three for..."

He trailed off, something clicking into place.

"For what?" Catrin pressed.

"For crossing between worlds," Al said slowly. "Earth to anchor you. Wind to carry you. Fire to break through the barrier."

The fire crackled. Nobody spoke.

"That's what the path is," Al continued, pieces falling into place. "That's why I can walk it. Because I have all three elements. The only way to reconnect the realities is to have someone who embodies earth, wind, and fire. Together. Unified."

"The dragons separated the clans to prevent this," Rhyosyn said, understanding dawning. "They knew. They knew that if the elements converged, someone could..."

"Could undo the split," Al finished. "Could challenge the System itself."

Silence.

"No wonder The Platinum Warden looked terrified," Catrin said softly. "You're not just breaking his law about clan separation. You're proof that his entire purpose—keeping the elements apart—was built on something that could fail."

Al sat back down, feeling the weight of it.

Earth, wind, and fire.

The keys to everything.

And they were all inside him, whether he wanted them or not.

"What are you thinking?" Catrin asked, sitting down beside him.

"That I'm causing problems just by existing," Al said. "That I have the blood of dragons in me."

Al looked at her. "That you barely know me."

"I know enough." Catrin met his eyes then sighed. "I know you keep choosing restraint when you could choose power. I know you refuse easy

answers. I know you're trying to do the right thing even when you don't know what that is."

She paused.

"And I know that if the universe decided you were needed now rather than later, it probably had a reason. Even if we don't understand it yet."

Al smiled faintly. "That's a lot of faith in cosmic timing."

"Maybe." Catrin smiled back. "Or maybe the universe knew that the world 220 years from now wouldn't need you as badly as the world needs you right now."

They sat in comfortable silence, watching the fire.

Somewhere in the distance, a night bird called. The sound echoed across the borderlands, carried on the wind.

Al thought about paths that existed but remained unsealed. About doors that opened before they were ready. About convergences that happened generations ahead of schedule.

He was early.

But he was here.

And that would have to be enough.

Because the paths were opening whether the world was ready or not.

And Al had never been very good at waiting.

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Chapter Sixty-Nine

CHAPTER 69

The Temple Scholar they consulted was younger than expected—mid-forties, sharp-eyed, with the kind of focus that came from years of wrestling with numbers that refused to make sense.

Her name was Keeper Lyris, and she specialized in prophecy mathematics.

"You want to understand the seventh-son condition," she said, spreading charts across her desk. "Most people think it's mystical, chosen by fate, destiny manifest."

"It's not?" Al asked.

"No." Lyris tapped a chart covered in probability curves. "It's statistics—pure, brutal mathematics."

She pulled out another document: population records going back centuries.

"In a world where men are born at a ratio of one to every fifteen or twenty women, having seven sons is extraordinarily rare. Not impossible, just... improbable."

"How improbable?" Catrin asked.

Lyris did quick calculations. "A man would need to father enough children to statistically produce seven males. Given the birth ratio, that means approximately 100 to 140 total children across multiple partners over decades."

Al felt his stomach sink. "That's..."

"Nearly impossible under normal circumstances," Lyris finished. "Which is why seventh-son prophecies stall. The condition simply doesn't occur naturally."

She pulled up more records.

"Look at the data. In the past five hundred years, we have documented exactly three men who fathered seven or more sons. Three. And of those, only one had a seventh son who survived to adulthood."

"Why does the seventh specifically matter?" Rhyosyn asked.

"Because prophecy requires specificity," Lyris explained. "It's not about 'a son.' It's about sequence and position. The seventh represents the completion of a cycle—a specific alignment of factors."

She spread out another chart.

"But here's where it gets interesting. The prophecies aren't just waiting for *any* seventh son; they're waiting for one who meets multiple conditions simultaneously."

Al leaned forward. "Like what?"

"Dragon lineage, foreign origin, convergence of bloodlines, specific timing windows." Lyris looked at him directly. "Individually, each condition is rare. Combined? Statistically impossible within normal generational timeframes."

"So they stalled," Elowen said, "waiting for someone who met all conditions at once."

"Exactly." Lyris pulled out a projection chart. "We calculated when such a convergence might naturally occur. Best estimate: one hundred and eighty to two hundred years from now, when enough variables align that the statistical improbability becomes merely... unlikely."

"But I'm here now," Al said.

"Yes." Lyris studied him with unnerving focus. "Which means either our calculations were catastrophically wrong, or something external accelerated the timeline."

"Like crossing realities," Rhyosyn suggested.

"Possibly." Lyris made notes. "If you originated in a reality with different birth ratios—say, equal male and female births—then the statistical barriers don't apply the same way."

Al thought about Earth, about normal gender ratios, about how common it was for men to have multiple children across their lifetimes. Seven sons would be unusual but not statistically impossible—not miraculous.

"In my reality," he said slowly, "men and women are born in roughly equal numbers—about 50/50."

Lyris stopped writing and looked up. "What?"

"The birth ratio is essentially one-to-one. It has been for all of human history."

The scholar stared at him. "That's... that would change everything. With equal ratios, the probability of a man fathering seven sons becomes..."

"Normal," Catrin finished. "Not statistically miraculous. Just... possible."

"Which means," Lyris said, realization dawning, "you're not a statistical anomaly in your reality. You're an anomaly in ours because our conditions don't apply to you."

She sat back, processing.

"The prophecies didn't stall because the condition was impossible. They stalled because we were looking in the wrong reality. The seventh son was always going to come from somewhere else. Somewhere the math worked differently."

Silence.

"So I'm not special," Al said. "I'm just... from a place where this is normal."

"No," Lyris corrected. "You're not destiny. You're not chosen by fate. You're not divinely appointed."

She met his eyes.

"You're permission."

The word hung in the air.

"Permission?" Al asked.

"Prophecies don't predict," Lyris explained. "They wait. They're conditional statements. 'When X occurs, then Y can happen.' The seventh-son condition isn't about heroism or chosen ones. It's a key. A lock that opens when specific factors align."

She pulled out a different text—ancient, bound in leather that had seen centuries.

"The old scholars understood this. They wrote it plainly: 'The seventh son grants permission for sealed paths to open. He does not walk them by choice, but by presence. His existence allows what was forbidden. His condition permits what was sealed.'"

"I don't choose anything," Al said. "I just exist, and suddenly prophecies start moving?"

"Yes." Lyris nodded. "That's exactly it. You're not the hero of these prophecies. You're the key they've been waiting for. Your role isn't to fulfill them—it's to make them possible for others to fulfill."

"That's..." Al struggled for words. "That's worse. That means I'm just a... a component. A tool."

"No," Catrin said quietly. "It means you're essential without being controlled. The prophecies need you to exist, but they don't dictate what you do. You enable choice. You don't make it."

Lyris nodded in approval. "Precisely. The seventh-son condition unlocks prophecies but doesn't determine outcomes. Others still have to act. Make decisions. Take risks. You simply make those actions possible."

She pointed to her charts.

"For generations, certain prophecies were sealed. Not because no one wanted to fulfill them, but because the mechanism for unlocking them didn't exist. The key was missing. The permission hadn't been granted."

"And now it has," Rhyosyn said. "Because Al exists."

"Yes." Lyris looked at Al with something like sympathy. "Forty-seven distinct prophecies involving seventh-son conditions have been stalled for generations. Some for centuries. All of them waiting for someone who met the statistical requirements to appear."

"And I met them accidentally," Al said.

"You met them by existing," Lyris corrected. "Nothing about your birth was intentional regarding prophecy. You weren't designed to be a seventh son. You weren't chosen. You simply... are one. And because you are, the locks opened."

"What happens now?" Elowen asked.

"Now?" Lyris looked grim. "Now every faction, every House, every power structure that has a stake in seventh-son prophecies will move. Because for the first time in generations—maybe centuries—those prophecies can actually progress."

"Meaning what, practically?" Rowena pressed.

"Meaning quests can be completed that were previously impossible. Agreements can be fulfilled that were stalled. Contracts can be honored that were indefinitely suspended. Powers can be claimed that were locked away."

Lyris met Al's eyes.

"You don't have to do anything. You just have to exist. And by existing, you've fundamentally changed what's possible in this world."

They left Keeper Lyris's study with more questions than answers.

As they walked through the Temple grounds, Catrin finally broke the silence.

"How do you feel about that? Being permission instead of destiny?"

Al thought about it. "Honestly? Better."

"Why?"

"Because destiny means I'm locked into a path. I don't get to choose." Al looked at the sky. "But permission? Permission means I enable choices. Other people's choices. That's... I can live with that."

"Even if those choices lead to conflict?" Rhyosyn asked. "Some of those forty-seven prophecies probably contradict each other. Enabling them all might cause chaos."

"Probably will cause chaos," Al agreed. "But that's not my fault. That's on the people who wrote prophecies that don't play nice together."

Elowen smiled. "You're taking this remarkably well."

"What's the alternative?" Al shrugged. "Freak out because I'm a statistical key that unlocked a bunch of magical bureaucracy? I'm already dealing with being from another reality, having three dragon bloodlines, and being Level 4 with a foreign magic system. This is just one more thing."

"Just one more impossibility," Catrin said.

"Story of my life." Al smiled faintly. "At least now I understand it. I'm not the hero. I'm not the chosen one. I'm just the guy who showed up and made it possible for things to start moving again."

"And that doesn't bother you?" Rowena asked.

"Why would it?" Al looked at her. "I've been a tool before. Every soldier is a tool for something larger than themselves. The difference is whether you understand what you're being used for and whether you consent to it."

He paused.

"I can't change being a seventh son. Can't un-exist. Can't make the prophecies lock again. But I can choose how I respond. What I do with the situation. Who I help and who I don't."

"You're choosing to be permission," Catrin said. "Not just accepting it."

"Yeah." Al nodded. "If prophecies are going to unlock because I exist, then I want to be around to make sure they don't go completely sideways. Not controlling outcomes. Just... being present. Making sure the permission I'm granting isn't abused."

Rhyosyn looked thoughtful. "That's a very Marine perspective."

"It's the only perspective I've got," Al smiled. "I enable others to complete their missions. I don't dictate what those missions are. But I can make sure those missions don't violate the basics—don't hurt innocents, don't abuse power, don't create tyranny." Only later did it occur to him that this was how dragons had always thought. Not rulers. Limits.

"And if they do?" Elowen asked.

"Then I stop granting permission," Al said. "Being the key doesn't mean I have to unlock everything. It just means I can. And I get to choose when and how."

They walked in silence for a moment.

"Keeper Lyris said you were early," Catrin finally said. "Two hundred and twenty years early. But now that I understand what you are—permission rather than destiny—I wonder if the timing was intentional."

"How so?"

"Because permission granted early means more people have more time to act. More opportunities to fulfill prophecies. More chances to shift outcomes before systems calcify." Catrin looked at him. "Maybe you were supposed to arrive when you did. Not when the world was ready for you, but when the world needed someone to shake loose centuries of stagnation."

Al considered that. "You think the universe has a plan?"

"I think reality has patterns," Catrin replied. "And you're part of one. Whether by accident or design doesn't matter as much as what you choose to do with it."

"Choose," Al repeated. "That's the word, isn't it? I'm permission. Which means everything that happens next is about choice. Not fate. Not destiny. Just people choosing what to do now that the locks are open."

"And you choose to help them choose well," Catrin said.

"Yeah." Al smiled. "That I can do. That I'm good at."

That evening, they received word that three separate factions had sent representatives requesting Al's presence for seventh-son prophecy fulfillment attempts.

"It's starting," Rhyosyn said, reading the messages. "Word has spread. People know what you are. They know what you enable."

"What do we do?" Elowen asked.

Al looked at the requests, evaluated them, and considered his options.

"We take them one at a time," he said. "Vet them. Make sure they're not trying to abuse the permission. Help the ones that are legitimate. Decline the ones that aren't."

"You're establishing criteria," Catrin observed.

"Someone has to," Al said, setting the messages down. "If I'm the key that unlocked forty-seven prophecies, then I'm responsible for making sure those prophecies don't cause more harm than good. Not controlling them. Just... curating them."

"That's a lot of responsibility," Rowena said.

"Yeah." Al met her eyes. "But it's the responsibility I can handle. I'm not destiny. I'm not fate. I'm not a hero."

He paused.

"I'm permission. And I'm going to make damn sure that permission is granted responsibly."

The fire crackled. Outside, the world continued turning.

And somewhere, forty-seven prophecies that had been sealed for generations began to stir.

Not because someone chose them.

But because someone finally made them possible.

And that someone was just trying to do the right thing with an impossible situation.

One prophecy at a time.

One choice at a time.

One act of permission at a time.

Because that's what Marines did.

They enabled missions.

They didn't dictate them.

But they made damn sure those missions were worth enabling.

And Al intended to be very selective about which missions got his permission.

Even if he was two hundred and twenty years early.

Especially since he was two hundred and twenty years early.

Time to make it count.

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Chapter Seventy

CHAPTER 70

The System chimed.

Not the standard alert. Something deeper—older—like someone had struck a bell at the bottom of the world.

[THE SYSTEM CONSOLIDATES]

[Records Integration: SEVENTH SON PROTOCOLS] [Source: Multiple prophecy frameworks] [Authority: Pre-System Covenant Structure] [Classification: INHERITANCE]

Al sat up straighter, the journal forgotten in his lap. "What—"

The notification expanded, filling his vision with text that seemed carved rather than printed, each line carrying the weight of centuries:

[INHERITANCE ASSIGNED] Subject: Aleric Tanim Status: Seventh Son (Confirmed) Bloodline: Dragon-Touched (Triple Convergence)

By presence and verification, all unresolved seventh-son prophecies now consolidate under single authority.

INHERITANCE SCOPE: PLANETARY Total Prophecies Affected: 47 Status: Active (Previously Stalled)

NOTE: This is not a quest. This is not a choice. This is classification of existing condition.

Subject does not fulfill prophecies. Subject grants permission for prophecy fulfillment. Subject bears responsibility for prophecy oversight.

INHERITANCE CANNOT BE DECLINED. INHERITANCE CANNOT BE TRANSFERRED.

Al stared at the words until they blurred. "I don't get a say in this?"

[SYSTEM RESPONSE]

You already exercised choice by existing.

Inheritance is consequence, not assignment.

You are the key. The lock has opened.

Your role: Permission and oversight. Not fulfillment. Not control.

Presence and judgment.

The notification shifted, showing the list. Forty-seven prophecies. Some benign—artifacts to recover, old disputes to resolve. Others less so: conquest, domination, fundamental changes to power that had been sealed for generations.

All of them now possible because he existed. All of them pointing to him as permission-granter.

[As Inheritance bearer, you possess authority to:] - Grant or withhold permission for prophecy attempts - Evaluate legitimacy of claims - Intervene in fulfillment processes - Revoke permission if conditions are violated

This authority supersedes local political structures. This authority predates current System architecture. This authority derives from pre-Covenant dragon law.

Exercise this authority responsibly.

The light faded. Al sat in silence, the fire crackling, the weight of forty-seven futures pressing down on his chest like a physical thing.

Catrin approached carefully, her footsteps soft on the stone. "What was that?"

"The System just made me..." He rubbed his face, searching for words. "Gatekeeper? Arbiter? Every seventh-son prophecy in the world now runs through me. I don't fulfill them. But they can't be fulfilled without my permission."

"That's more authority than most Houses have," Rhyosyn said, her voice hushed.

"Yeah." Al looked at his hands—scarred, calloused, still shaking slightly. "And I didn't ask for it. Didn't earn it. Just... inherited it. Because I'm a seventh son and nobody else is."

"What will you do?" Elowen asked.

The question hung in the firelight. Al thought of the Marine Corps, of oaths taken, of responsibility accepted before he understood its weight. He thought of these women—strangers who had become allies, allies who had become family.

"What I said I'd do," he said finally. "Vet them. Grant permission for the good ones. Deny the bad ones. Try not to screw it up too badly."

"That's a lot of responsibility," Rowena said quietly.

"Yeah." Al managed a smile, grim but real. "But it's better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

"Letting forty-seven prophecies activate without any oversight at all." He stood, stretching tension from his shoulders. "At least this way, someone's paying attention."

They broke camp at dawn.

Not rushed—not the frantic packing of flight, but the deliberate preparation of people who had decided where they were going. Al rolled his blankets with military precision, checked his gear by touch, and found himself watching the women do the same.

Catrin folded her maps with the care of someone who understood that information was survival. Rhyosyn muttered over her spell components, testing each one before packing it away. Elowen checked her armor straps with the unconscious thoroughness of nobility trained to war. Rowena simply... prepared, efficient and silent.

None of them asked about the forty-seven prophecies. Not yet. That conversation would come, Al knew, in pieces over weeks and months. For now, they were letting him breathe.

"You're staring," Catrin said, without looking up.

"Thinking," Al corrected. "About how none of you ran."

"Ran from what?"

"From this. From me." He gestured vaguely at the mountains around them, the weight he carried. "You could have. Should have, maybe. I'm foreign, unproven, and now I'm apparently the bottleneck for every major prophecy on the continent."

Rhyosyn snorted, securing her pack. "And miss watching you try to administrate ancient dragon law? Never."

"Besides," Elowen added, "running would imply we had somewhere better to be."

"Do you?"

Four sets of eyes met his. Catrin's calm assessment. Rhyosyn's fierce curiosity. Elowen's calculating pride. Rowena's quiet certainty.

"No," Catrin said simply. "We don't."

They rode out as the sun cleared the eastern peaks, five horses on a mountain road that wound toward Varen's Gate and whatever lay beyond. Al found himself at the front not by choice but by default—the others falling into formation around him as naturally as breathing.

He wasn't running anymore. For the first time since arriving on Atherai, since the chains and the cult and the desperate scramble to survive, he was simply... moving. Toward something rather than away from it.

The road ahead was uncertain. Forty-seven prophecies waited in the wings, each one a potential crisis or opportunity. He would need to learn, to study, to build something that could support the weight of what he'd been given.

But that was tomorrow's work. Today's was simpler: ride, watch, protect the people who had chosen to stand beside him.

Al touched the reins and let his horse find its pace. Behind him, he heard Rhyosyn arguing with Elowen about something trivial, Catrin's dry interjections, Rowena's rare laugh. The sounds of a family, however unlikely, however new.

The mountains fell away behind them. The plains opened ahead. And somewhere in the distance, Varen's Gate waited—not as an ending, but as a beginning.

END BOOK ONE

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Stories like *Dragon Touched* wouldn't reach nearly as many readers without the communities that bring fans of LitRPG, GameLit, and progression fantasy together.

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